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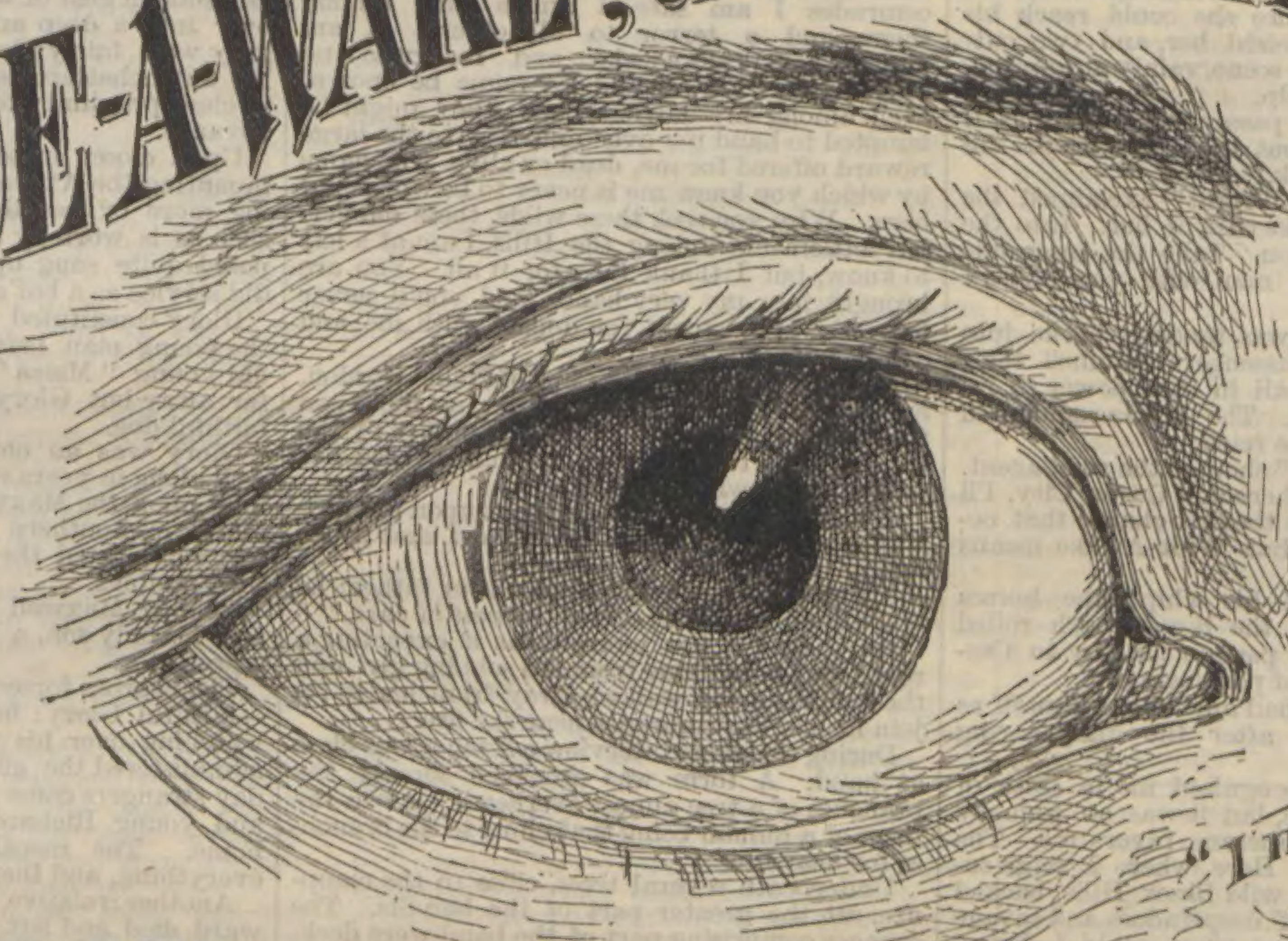
Complete
In One Number.

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WIDE-A-WAKE, the Robber King;



OR

THE IDIOT OF THE BLACK HILLS.

"I never Sleep."

A DRAMATIC ROMANCE OF WILD LIFE ON THE BORDER.

BY FRANK DUMONT,

AUTHOR OF "MARKED FOR LIFE," "HELD AT BAY," "BOB, THE MINSTREL," "DEAD TO THE WORLD," "IN THE WEB,"
"BANDITS OF THE MARSH," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OUTLAW'S CAPTIVE.

"HALT! Hands up, everybody, or you're all dead men!"

A loud, ringing voice shouted the dread summons and warning; the sharp crack of a pistol echoed through the rocky ravine, and the bullet whizzed past the head of the driver of the lumbering stage coach.

A dozen forms leaped from the gloomy sides of the defile, and the glitter of polished steel appeared in the fast approaching shadows of night.

Several forms sprang to the horses' heads, and in an instant the coach stopped and all was commotion within.

"Hands up, everybody!" repeated the same voice, and the muzzle of a revolver was thrust through the window of the coach.

At the first warning of danger two passengers who were seated behind the coach scrambled hastily down, and rapidly disappeared in the darkness. These two proved to be Dennis Flaherty, a native of the Emerald Isle, and Wah Sing, a recent arrival from the Flowery Kingdom.

With these two exceptions, the driver and the passengers were at the mercy of the road-agents, who surrounded the coach and began their work of plunder.

So sudden had been the attack and so unexpected the summons to "halt," that the passengers had scarcely time to realize the situation ere the ominous click of fire-arms warned them that it would be folly to attempt a resistance. One by one they emerged from the coach and submitted to be plundered.

Dennis Flaherty plunged headlong over rocks

and through brambles until he reached the summit, and glancing down into the ravine, saw in the dim light, the outlines of the coach. Scarcely stopping to take a second look, Dennis continued his flight, and soon put a respectable distance between himself and the ravine. Meanwhile the road-agents were disposing of the coach passengers. Part of the marauders, with leveled rifles, kept the passengers at bay, while the remainder plundered the inmates of the coach.

Suddenly a low murmur broke from the lips of the outlaws, as a form of surpassing loveliness and youth stepped out from the coach and alighted.

It was a beautiful girl, scarcely more than eighteen years old. Her long golden hair flowing freely over the traveling cloak and from beneath the plain hat fastened loosely upon her

head. Her face was remarkably pale, but beautiful beyond description.

As she stepped from the stage coach the circle of outlaws fell back, and for a moment the weapons were lowered.

As she reached the rocky road another form emerged from the vehicle. It was that of a man, probably not over fifty, but whose hair was almost white, and whose face denoted care and sorrow.

The moment he alighted, the fair creature flung her arms about him, as if to shield him from the armed ruffians who encircled them and their fellow-passengers.

The leader of the road-agents stepped from the circle and approached. A half mask of black velvet hid the upper part of his features from view. He was tall, well-built, and seemed to be of more refined origin than the rough crew at his back.

"Come! come! no delay! If you have any valuables, hand them over at once!" he exclaimed.

The moment that the gray-haired passenger heard the voice he started visibly, and peered at the masked outlaw before him as if to penetrate the disguise.

His face blanched and a tremor passed through his frame.

Gently removing the arms of the beautiful girl from about his neck, he strode before the towering form of the outlaw captain, and exclaimed:

"Is it you, John Ad—"

But ere he could finish the name, the robber dealt him a blow with the heavy weapon, and the old man fell to the earth without a groan, the blood staining his white hair and the pale upturned face seemed like that of a corpse.

A piercing shriek burst from the lips of the girl as she darted toward the form of the stricken man, but before she could reach his side powerful hands seized her, and two outlaws bore her from the scene, vainly attempting to stifle her cries for help.

The little handful of passengers started as if to attempt a rescue, but the rifles of the villains held them in check.

"The young lady is all right!" exclaimed the outlaw chief. "I'll take care of her. Into the coach every one of you. Take the insensible body of this wounded man with you, and be quick about it."

The inanimate body was tenderly borne into the coach, and the passengers resumed their places within it, doing all in their power to revive the wounded man. The driver remounted the coach and seized the reins.

"Now, off with you!" shouted the road-agent. "If you stop between here and Custer City, I'll riddle you with bullets the first chance that occurs, and you know that Wide-Awake means every word he says."

The driver cracked his whip; the horses plunged forward and the heavy coach rolled on through the narrow pass on the way to Custer City with its load of passengers.

The tall person who had announced himself as Wide-Awake glanced after the disappearing coach and muttered:

"Curse him! He recognized me in spite of my mask and disguise, but it was an unlucky recognition for him. Fortune favors me. The girl is in my power. Here, where I reign supreme master of the wild Black Hills, backed by a powerful band of desperadoes and savage allies. She is here; what more could I desire? Fate is unusually kind to me after these weary years of waiting."

The outlaw turned, and motioning to his comrades to follow, he made his way up the steep side of the ravine and soon gained a path that led to the summit.

The bandits in charge of the young girl were far in advance, and save the tramping of the outlaws, a profound stillness reigned in that wild and desolate neighborhood. A rapid walk soon brought them to another deep and gloomy defile into which they descended, and by the aid of a flaming torch the bandits proceeded along the narrow and intricate rocky passage, to a glen below.

The flambeau cast a lurid light upon the rocky sides of the ravine and upon the figures of the masked outlaws following their chief, and the wild, weird shadows of the men upon the rocks had the appearance of gigantic fiends pursuing the desperadoes. As the light rose and fell the shadows assumed fantastic shapes, and the entire picture formed a startling scene for the brush of an artist fond of wild material.

A sudden turn of the ravine showed the dancing rays of a camp-fire in the glen, and the bandits rapidly made their way toward it.

In a few moments they stepped within the circle of light cast by the blazing pile of brush and logs, and were safe within their retreat in the glen.

It was a wild spot and an inaccessible point for the bandit encampment. Huge rocks towered upon all sides and the narrow defile that led down into this glen seemed to be the only outlet or entrance. Far under the overhanging rocks loomed the dark mouths of several caverns.

Upon a pile of buffalo robes, not a dozen

yards from the fire, lay the captive maiden, and the entire outlaw crew were moving hither and thither.

Wide-Awake strode toward one of the caverns, followed by several of the band, and in a few moments the spoils were secreted and all sought the open air again.

The outlaw chief sought the presence of the captive. She turned her head as the sound of his footstep smote her ear.

"Nellie Gordon! look up! Do you know why you are a captive in this place?"

The beautiful girl shuddered at the sound of the voice, and the bandit stepped within the circle of light and removed his mask.

A slight scream escaped from the lips of the girl as she beheld the features thus exposed to her gaze. But, before she could utter a word, the road-agent continued:

"You little dreamed to see me in the wilds of the Black Hills, and I was just as much surprised when I beheld you emerge from the coach. You remember our last meeting. You remember how you refused my offers, scorned my love, and imperiously bade me leave your presence. Why? Because you said that I associated with reckless men, and that my hours were passed in the gambling places of Chicago. All this was true, but I would have renounced all for you. But my case was hopeless. You bade me leave and I did so—but not without a vow that you would yet be mine, if I had to wade through streams of blood to possess you. Your father is my mortal foe. I possess a secret that would condemn him for the remainder of his years to a prison. He in turn knows that my hands are stained with the blood of a relative, but it was in self-defense; yet his evidence would hang me, as a large reward is offered for my apprehension by the Governor of Illinois. Here among my desperate comrades I am safe—I am a king among them, and a terror to all others. I am known as Wide-Awake, and recognize no other name. For, should my name be known, even among my lawless band, they might be tempted to hand me over and receive the large reward offered for me, dead or alive. The name by which you knew me is never to be whispered here. Why you seek these wilds, these dangerous settlements among the Hills, I am at a loss to know, but I thank fate for it all. You are brought into my very hands, and you'll never leave this spot except you depart with me and as my wife."

A groan broke from the lips of Nellie Gordon, and her face blanched still whiter as she heard the dread sentence pronounced upon her by the bandit. She turned from him and covered her pale features with her hands.

The outlaw gazed for a moment upon the girl's form sobbing almost at his feet, and spoke again.

"You need not worry about your father; he is not hurt, and will receive the best of care."

He paused a few moments as if expecting a reply, but none came from the sobbing girl, and the ruffian slowly walked away from her to rejoin his lawless comrades near the fire.

During this short interview a listener was close at hand. A form was crouched among the branches of a tree almost overhead. It was the form of a human being that clung to the branches for dear life.

Underneath several trees, close to the camp-fire, sat the greater part of the bandits. The savages comprising part of the band were decked out in savage finery and war-paint, and seemed quite at home with their white comrades. A more villainous-looking crew would be hard to find upon either hemisphere.

One of the savages was in the act of examining his rifle, when the deafening report of the weapon followed his careless examination, and the bullet crashed through the branches of the tree where the listener had ensconced himself.

Uttering a yell of mortal fear, the person alighted to dropped from among the branches upon the earth, bounding like a rubber ball.

A dozen pair of hands seized the intruder almost instantly.

"Me good Chinaman; no sabe robber Melican; no got a blamee cent! Please lem go home. Wah Sing, solid man, all samee!"

CHAPTER II.

THE APPARITION ON THE CLIFF.

WAH SING fell upon his knees in abject terror, as the glittering knife held in the grasp of a desperado, flashed before his almond-shaped eyes. His very pig-tail evinced a disposition to stand erect through fright.

The entire circle of outlaws were for the moment alarmed as the Celestial intruder had made his appearance from the tree in such an unexpected manner that it threw the wild crew into consternation. Despite Wah Sing's loud protestations he was speedily bound and gagged and hustled into one of the smaller caves, there to bewail his fate and ruminate upon the troubles besetting a Chinese "emigrant."

In escaping from the coach the Chinaman had plunged onward in the dark and had by mere accident discovered the retreat of the road-agents. Approaching closer to the camp-fire,

he suddenly espied the outlaw acting as a sentry. With the agility of a squirrel Wah Sing seized the lower limbs of a tree close at hand, and swung himself into the branches. He remained there a silent spectator of the scene below until the accidental discharge of the Indian's rifle caused him to loosen his hold for a moment, and in the next, Wah Sing fell from his perch into the hands of the robber crew.

Several miles from this glen two persons were endeavoring to pick their way through gullies and ravines that abounded in that section of the Black Hills.

Night had settled over the desolate region, and short sharp flashes of lightning heralded an approaching storm.

Now and then the two persons would halt and await the next flash of lightning before proceeding.

The foremost was a young man scarcely more than twenty-three years of age. He was attired in a plain suit of woolen goods, wore high top-boots, a wide-brimmed felt hat and red flannel shirt, which peeped from beneath the close-buttoned vest. A broad leather belt into which were thrust a brace of revolvers, completed his general appearance. His features were plain, frank and honest, and the slight mustache relieved the boyish countenance of its too youthful appearance.

As he leans upon his rifle he turns to his companion and a blinding flash of lightning illuminated the cañon, and the low rumble of thunder sounds close at hand.

"Well, I think we are lost, Glory!"

The person addressed as "Glory" was an aged negro, who started and trembled at every vivid flash of the forked lightning. He was attired in coarse gray garments also, and shoes large enough for a giant. He was bare-headed, as a sudden gust of wind had carried his hat far over into a deep and inaccessible gully. His gray wool fairly gleamed in the darkness, and his teeth chattered as the electric fluid played in close proximity to himself and the youth in advance.

Upon closer inspection the gray wool surmounting the African's skull proved to be nothing more or less than a close-fitting wig, one such as is worn by the minstrels. The wig reposed quite snug upon his bald cranium, and did service as a hat also.

Glory constituted himself the body-guard of the young man before mentioned, and seldom did young "Massa" Richard Maxwell venture far away but Glory trotted at his heels like a faithful dog.

Glory was an old family servant, and was well along in years when Richard first saw daylight upon the Maxwell plantation—a beautiful estate in Southern Georgia. The ravages of war obliterated the beautiful mansion and its surroundings.

Colonel Maxwell fell at Missionary Ridge, and his only son, a mere boy, was left without a protector.

The negroes forsook the old home, all but one—faithful Glory; he remained, caring for and watching over his young "massa." An uncle administered the affairs of the estate, and one day strangers came and claimed the plantation, and young Richard Maxwell was without a home. The rascally uncle had mortgaged everything, and then suddenly disappeared.

Another relative in Alabama shortly afterward died and left Richard a valuable package of documents. These proved to be claims located in the gold regions of the Black Hills.

Our young hero, who had completed his studies and bid fair to become a successful civil engineer, one day called Glory to his side and unfolded his plans to the aged negro. A short consultation followed, and Richard, accompanied by his sable "guardian," departed for the wilds of Dakota to ferret out his claims, and at the same time carve out a future for himself.

The young engineer found profitable employment in Custer City, and at the same time looked after his claims, and spent a great deal of time prospecting among the wild range of hills in the vicinity.

It was during one of these excursions that we find Richard Maxwell and the negro Glory vainly seeking an exit from the desolate ravine into which they had wandered, and the muttering storm close at hand threatened to make the night a disagreeable one for the two wanderers.

"I think we've lost our way, Glory," repeated Richard, as he peered forward to gain an idea of the surroundings, when the next flash would light up the dark glen.

"I reckon we is, Massa Richard, and de Lor' only knows how we is gwine to find de way out! Hallelujah! dat was full of brimstone!"

The negro's last exclamation was caused by a vivid flash of blue lightning that zig-zagged across the ravine, and for a moment blinded the African. A terrific crash of thunder followed. A detonation that shook the crags upon either side of the glen, and caused the very earth to tremble beneath the feet of the two men.

"Gwine to be an 'arthquake," gasped Glory, as he clung to Richard's coat. "De Lor' forgib dis ole nigger for stealing chickens when he was a

young 'coon; dat's all de wickedness I ebber done—and dat's a fact!"

Glory trembled in every limb, as peal upon peal of thunder echoed through the glen.

Then the rain fell in a perfect deluge—blinding sheets, that caused our two friends to seek shelter beneath an overhanging rock. Here they crouched and avoided the fury of the storm. The ravine seemed to be illuminated by a continual blaze of the electric fluid, and the thunder threatened each moment to dislodge the huge boulders above and crush them beneath the massive rocks.

Suddenly an unearthly cry arose far above the noise of the tempest—a shout that echoed above the roar of the elements.

Glancing toward the summit of the opposite cliff, Richard saw a sight that almost froze the blood in his veins. Glory saw it also, and uttering a yell of terror, the negro groveled upon the earth in a vain attempt to shut out the awful apparition.

Upon the verge of the cliff stood an unearthly form, clad in skins that rose and fell, swayed by the wind. Long white hair streamed from its head, mingling with the long white beard, that grew upon the wild, fiendish face.

The lightning seemed to circle about the apparition, and the blinding rain fell upon it. The thunder shook the very crag upon which it stood, yet the weird phantom stood perfectly motionless, with its long staff extended, as if in the very act of defying the elements and inviting the lightning to an attack.

The creature presented a most horrible appearance, and it was a sight well calculated to appall the stoutest heart.

Uttering another ear-piercing shriek, the unearthly apparition extended both arms out toward the heavens. A terrific peal of thunder shook the crags to their very foundation, and a swift bolt struck a huge tree close to the phantom.

The tree was immediately riven asunder, and a pale blue flame burst from the trunk, as it fell with a dull thud to the earth. The volumes of water immediately extinguished the insipid blaze, and a gloom settled upon the crag.

When the next flash lit up the desolate ravine, the spot where the weird creature had appeared was vacant. It had disappeared. Richard raised his hand to his eyes, and looked again. He was about to conclude that it was a horrible creature of imagination, when he was roused from his reverie by the negro at his side, who hoarsely whispered:

"Bress de Lor', de horrible ghost is gone!"

"It is gone," vaguely replied Richard. "Did you see it distinctly, Glory?"

"Bress you, chile, I reckon I did. Dat was de debbil, sure! I see'd his horns and de clover foot. Let's get out ob dis place; it smells just like de sulphur place, and I reckon dis is whar Satan lives when he's at home. Golly, massa! it don't do for Satan to defy de lightning too much. Dat thunderbolt come mighty nigh taking his head plumb off. Come on, let's go, Massa Richard. See, it's done most stop raining."

The rain had almost ceased to fall, as Richard and his sable comrade emerged from beneath the overhanging rocks. The distant thunder rumbled, and occasional flashes lit up the surroundings. But the storm had spent its fury, and the rain was rapidly abating.

Richard turned down the rocky pathway, closely followed by Glory, who hobbled after his youthful master, now and then turning his head to see if the horrible apparition was again in view.

Richard suddenly stopped, and motioned Glory to remain quiet.

Both peered into the gloom directly ahead, and saw, far down in the glen beyond, a bright light. It seemed like a star in the darkness.

"A camp-fire," whispered Richard. "It may be the camp of hostile Indians, or, far worse, the ruffians that infest these hills, plundering and murdering all who fall into their hands."

"Den let's turn back, Massa Richard. I isn't 'zactly afraid, but I hates to lose dis wig. If de Injuns go to sculp me dey won't find any ha'r on de top ob dis cranium, but dey'll steal de wig, and I wouldn't lose dat for a million dollars," and the negro made a movement to retrace his steps.

"Stop!" commanded Richard. "I said it might be the camp-fire of foes. We'll draw nearer and see for ourselves. Come along and move quietly."

The two then moved forward, keeping the light of the distant camp-fire in full view, and gradually drew nearer to it.

Richard was about to leap down upon a lower range of boulders, when a scream—a woman's scream—came from the gloomy depths below from the direction of the camp-fire.

For a moment the shriek echoed among the solitudes of the ravines; then the scream was repeated, this time nearer.

"Did you hear that? Follow me, Glory; there's a woman in danger."

Richard leaped down and plunged in the direction of the scream and loosened therevolvers in his belt as he sped onward.

Suddenly a slight form appeared in the gloom

a few yards from him, and then the sound of tramping feet in pursuit was borne to his ears and the sound of a gruff voice bid the fugitive halt.

The instant that the fleeing girl saw the form of the youth in the uncertain light, she gave a slight scream of joy and surprise, and almost instantly she darted forward and Richard caught the fainting form in his arms and quickly drew his revolvers as he placed the arms of the girl about his neck, leaving his hands free to manipulate the weapons.

He had scarcely done so when several burly figures loomed up directly before him, and started suddenly as they saw the youth supporting the half-fainting form of their escaped prisoner, while in either hand a heavy revolver was grasped, and the muzzles covered the foremost of the bandits as they stumbled toward the object of their pursuit.

A curse broke from the lips of the foremost as the glittering barrels of the revolvers caught his eye, and he glared like a wild beast at the youth who thus held him at bay.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

For an instant the baffled outlaws glared upon the brave youth. A sound of footsteps close at hand was plainly heard by the group, and in a few moments a party of bandits came upon the scene, preceded by one of the desperadoes bearing a flaming torch.

The light cast a ruddy glare upon the strange scene, and friends and foe stood face to face. The tall, masked figure in advance spoke.

"Hand over that girl to our care or you're a dead man!"

Nellie Gordon shrunk closer to the youth, and in a pleading voice, tremulous with fear, exclaimed:

"Please don't allow them to take me away, sir! Save me if you can!"

"Look up, my poor, trembling little one; you are safe!" replied Richard.

"Come, hand over that girl to our care!" shouted the bandit.

"She is under my protection!" cried Richard. "She has sought it, and I freely give it. She is a woman in distress, and I protect one wherever I find her. Stand back! I am armed, and the first that approaches will lie a bleeding corpse upon the rocks," and the brave youth leveled a revolver full at Wide-Awake.

The ruffian turned livid with rage, but his mask concealed his features and their terrible expression from the boyish figure that stood resolutely before him.

"You have crossed my path!" he shouted, "and your life isn't worth a straw."

"Indeed!" sneered Richard. "I place quite a value upon my life, and let me again repeat that this young lady is now under my protection, and the first that approaches me dies on the spot."

"I have placed you in peril," exclaimed Nellie. "For my sake avoid a quarrel. I will return with them to the place from where I have but just escaped, and trust that Heaven will send me assistance."

"Heaven has sent you assistance. I am here to aid you," said Richard. "I have faced death too often to be intimidated by those bullies—creatures who call themselves men, yet war upon unprotected females! Be not afraid, miss; I can die but once, at any rate."

"I'd send a bullet through your head, but that would be a waste of powder and lead, and maybe endanger the life of the girl at your side. See the folly of your resistance!" cried the bandit, triumphantly; "we are all against one."

"That's a lie for you! Yez are all against two, for I'm wid the young man, and be my sowl! I think we can lick the whole pack of yez without any trouble at all, at all!"

A voice, rich with the brogue, shouted the foregoing, and a short, lively form leaped down from the gloom above, and with fists doubled up, and capering about like a dancing-master, the new-comer went through his manual of fistic exercises before the astonished group of bandits.

"Who'll have a crack alongside of the head? I can give it to you, for me name's Dennis Flaherty; and me father and mother were both blacksmiths, and I have a hand on me like a sledge-hammer."

Dennis Flaherty made a lunge at the nearest outlaw, who drew back to avoid the blow aimed at him by the lively Irishman.

"Down with them, boys! No quarter if they resist! Don't harm the girl."

Wide-Awake turned to his comrades, and a rapid discharge of firearms followed the outlaw's command. The bullets flattened themselves against the rocky sides of the ravine, and Richard sent several shots in quick succession into the very midst of the advancing bandits.

A groan and a yell followed Richard's second shot, and a desperado fell headlong to the earth in the agonies of death.

Nellie uttered a piercing shriek, and the next moment the conflict was a hand-to-hand one. Dennis Flaherty struck out right and left, and the blows of his fist rung out like blows upon an

anvil, and generally the bandit receiving it went to the earth like a felled ox.

But the odds were too great, and Dennis turned to flee, as an outlaw sent a bullet after the fleeing Irishman. Dennis dropped suddenly to the earth and remained perfectly quiet, apparently dead.

Richard had been overpowered by numbers, and he had just forced Wide-Awake to the earth, when he was seized by the outlaw's followers, and almost instantly our hero's arms were securely pinioned, and the burly road-agent strode before his helpless captive.

Nellie was placed in charge of two bandits, who slowly began their journey back to the retreat in the glen. They passed the prostrate body of Dennis Flaherty, and one paused to gaze at the apparently dead body of the Irishman.

"That will make a nice meal for the wolves," said one to his comrade, and both passed on toward the glen.

Wide-Awake paused before Richard a few moments, as if contemplating his prisoner.

"You have played a desperate game, but you have lost it, and the consequences are about to follow. You have pluck and courage, and I'll give you a chance for your life," said the outlaw chief; and he proceeded: "The chance I offer is this—join us; swear eternal allegiance to the band, and your life is saved!"

"Join you?" said Richard, his lip curling with scorn and his eyes flashing with indignation. "Join you? Never! I have seen what class of men you are; that is sufficient for me. Release me; give me a chance to stand face to face with you, with any weapon which you may select, and I will take my chances of life."

"Your chances are thrown away. I have given you all the chances I intended you should have. Your moments are few. You have interfered with our purposes, and, for all I know, you are a spy in the service of the 'vigilantes,' and deserve death, anyway. Prepare, for the seconds remaining to you are indeed numbered!"

"Coward! Let me see your features that I may see whom I have defied!" exclaimed Richard.

The outlaw hesitated a moment, then advanced toward his captive.

"You can behold my features, for you are about to be launched into eternity, and can never reveal what you have seen."

Wide-Awake boldly removed his mask, and as the light of the torch fell upon the features of the road-agent, Richard started back surprised.

"Judge Brooks!" exclaimed the prisoner, and he gasped with astonishment.

The redoubtable and feared Wide-Awake and Judge Brooks, the leader of the "vigilantes" and lynchers, were one and the same person! No wonder that the desperate band flourished, and that none of the order were ever apprehended. Every move of the vigilantes was known to the members of this daring and murderous gang of ruffians that infested the Black Hills, and Richard now saw how it was that the desperadoes were so reckless and apparently law defying. Their leader was an influential character in Custer City, and his frequent absence from the town caused no remarks of suspicion, as Judge Brooks was above such suspicion, and was known to be violent and radical in his plans for clearing the Hills of desperate characters. His frequent absence was accounted for in various excuses, and always acceptable and of interest to the Vigilance Committee.

No wonder that Richard started with surprise when he recognized the features thus disclosed to his view.

For a few moments the young man was speechless.

Wide-Awake replaced his mask and was the first to break the silence.

"You have seen enough to convince you that I play two rôles. Serve both oppressors and oppressed. You have discovered a great secret, but it will be of no benefit to you. Ho, there! Rodman, have you a rope?"

"Here's a lariat," replied the fellow addressed as Rodman, and he unwound a lariat from about his waist, and approached the outlaw chief.

"What's to be done with it?"

"Swing one end of it over the limb and fasten it. Make a noose at the other end."

Wide-Awake pointed to a tree close at hand. A low limb branched out from the heavy trunk; and to this limb the lariat was speedily attached.

"You are determined to take my life?" queried Richard.

"Yes; nothing could induce me to spare you. You have crossed me to-night, and you now possess a secret which every member of my band is sworn to keep sacred. You have forfeited your life. Make ready, boys!"

Wide-Awake motioned to the ruffians about him, and Richard was borne, without a struggle, beneath the fatal limb, where the noose hung down ready for its victim.

"Up with him quick! The sooner we dispose of him the better," said the bandit.

Was it imagination, or did Richard see signs

of life as he gazed toward the inanimate body of Dennis Flaherty? Slowly and quickly the Irishman was creeping away in the dark toward the deep glen!

Before Richard could look again he was lifted from the earth by the combined efforts of several desperadoes, and the noose was quickly adjusted about his neck; when the outlaws released their hold upon the youth, and he hung dangling from the limb. A choking sensation followed, and the young man felt sharp pains shooting throughout his body, and especially through his brain; fire seemed to dance before his eyes; showers of sparks shot about him, and finally he saw all receding—all became dark—and a blank to him.

The moment that the outlaws launched the youth from the limb they drew back to watch the effect of their cruel work. At this juncture the rapid discharge of a pistol resounded close at hand in the direction of the glen. Instantly the outlaws, headed by Wide-Awake, plunged in the direction of the sounds and were soon lost to view.

The light of the torch being removed, the spot was plunged in extreme gloom, and Richard hung in the darkness slowly strangling to death.

Scarcely had the bandits left the scene, when a wild, weird figure suddenly appeared beneath the tree near the suspended form. It was the same wild apparition that had appeared on the cliff during the storm. The long white hair gleamed in the surrounding gloom. One moment the strange figure hovered beneath the tree, and then it reached forth and with a long glittering knife it severed the lariat and caught the descending form of the hanging man in its outstretched arms.

One moment to peer in the darkness in the direction of the departing ruffians, and then, glaring like a wild beast, and uttering an unearthly scream, the strange apparition threw the insensible body over its shoulder and darted from crag to crag with its burden, leaping across chasms and now and then grasping a vine or stunted tree, but swiftly ascending the rugged sides of the ravine to the summit of the rocky barriers. Gaining the top it paused an instant to gaze into the gloomy depths below, and again giving vent to an unearthly howl, it disappeared in the darkness like a fiend bearing away a lost soul.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY OF A CRIME.

THERE was great excitement in Custer City and the surrounding settlement when the stage-coach rolled into town, and the news of the attack and robbery was related by the driver and passengers. Excited throngs of red-shirted miners gathered about each passenger, and heard the story over and over again, vowing dire vengeance upon the bandits. The nearest tree would have been the instrument of vengeance, with a rope about the neck of each ruffian, to add "ornaments" to the stout limbs.

Warren Gordon, the wounded passenger, was carefully removed to the only hotel in town, and tenderly cared for. Before night he rallied, and was pronounced out of danger.

The abduction of Nellie Gordon caused the greatest excitement, and the miners were eagerly seeking some clew whereby the outlaws could be traced. The vigilance society held a meeting at once, and Judge Brooks presided.

Everything was arranged to follow on the track of the road-agents, and destroy the band at one fell swoop. Several spies were sent out by Brooks, and it is needless to say that they returned without finding any traces of the bandits, or any clew to their place of concealment.

By the close of that day the excitement had calmed down considerably, and all looked to the leader of the "vigilantes" to ferret out the rascals, and treat them with summary punishment.

Warren Gordon reclined upon a couch in a small room of the hotel. A window opened toward the bluffs, and a huge tree grew close to the window. The rays of the setting sun streamed through the open window, and the sound of shouting miners and rumbling of wagons in the street below were borne to the wounded man's ears. A footstep resounded on the staircase, and the next moment the door opened, and a tall person entered the room and carefully bolted the door after him. He strode to the center of the room, and gazed upon the reclining form upon the couch.

"I am glad to see that you are recovering from that blow, and I trust soon to see you well enough to go out into the fresh air," the newcomer said.

Warren Gordon started at the sound of the voice, and raised himself upon his elbow. The tall man raised his hand to his face and instantly removed the whiskers that adorned his features, and the face of the ruffian known as Wide-Awake met the astonished gaze of the man upon the couch.

"Be calm! be calm!" exclaimed the outlaw chief; "I have ventured here to visit you. I know I am unexpected, but, forgive the intrusion."

"Scoundrel, what have you done with my child?"

"She is perfectly safe; not a hair of her head has been injured. She is tenderly cared for, and as safe as though she was beneath this roof."

"Villain! how dare you venture here when the inhabitants of this place thirst for your blood?" said Warren Gordon, excitedly.

"Bah! I don't fear them. I've heard their shouts of vengeance and their menaces too often to be intimidated in the least."

"One word from me, and you are lost. I could deliver you into their hands. It would be right. It would be what you deserve, and if you do not promise instantly to restore my child to me, I will denounce you at once."

Gordon made a movement, as if to approach the open window. Wide-Awake laughed derisively, as he saw the movement.

"Stop!" he exclaimed; "not so fast. You forget, friend Gordon, that I can speak a few words that will consign you to a prison. You forget that I know your secret, and can use it at my pleasure. As for you denouncing me, ha! ha! ha! You would be laughed at for your pains. Now, sir, step to that window, and shout that the renowned Wide-Awake is within this room. Denounce me. I will not prevent you."

Gordon sunk back, utterly confused; the bold desperado held the winning hand, and the aged gentleman was really in the outlaw's power and at his mercy. Several times he started as if to rush to the window and boldly denounce the ruffian, who stood by with a look of triumph illuminating his wicked countenance, but the shadow of some crime seemed to hover above him, and he abandoned the idea.

"Well, have you thought better of it?" asked Wide-Awake. "That's right; we are old friends, Gordon, although not upon the best of terms, yet for old acquaintance's sake let us not quarrel. The blow I struck you when you were about to pronounce my name I regret exceedingly, but I was compelled to strike. Self-preservation is the first law of nature, and I follow that law to the letter."

Wide-Awake took the only chair in the room, and coming closer to the couch, seated himself, and drawing forth a cigar, he coolly lit it, and blowing a few puffs of smoke, he turned to his observer on the bed and resumed:

"It might be well to rehearse a scrap of history for your benefit, Warren Gordon, in order to see if my memory serves me right, and that I am not mistaken in some of the most important points of the narrative. Are you prepared to listen?"

"Go on," hoarsely whispered the reclining man, as he fixed his large eyes upon the malignant face of the bandit, who sat close by. Wide-Awake gazed into vacancy a few moments, as if recalling events, and then, tapping the ashes from his cigar, he proceeded:

"You had a twin brother. Both you and the aforesaid brother were left an equal amount by the will of your father—property and cash amounting to a considerable sum. The conditions of the will were that in case of the death of one, the other should inherit his share; but while both lived, both were to share equally alike. Am I right, Gordon?"

"One of the brothers was of a speculative turn of mind; forever plotting some means by which to increase his share of the legacy. The other was content to invest in real estate, mining claims, and especially claims out among these Western wilds. The discovery of gold in these regions caused a fever of excitement throughout the length and breadth of the land, and Robert Gordon invested in some claims located in this vicinity. Am I quite right as to the locality?"

Wide-Awake paused and looked sharply at his listener, who nervously grasped the bed-clothing and drank in the words of the ruffian who related the incidents in a tantalizing manner and like one conscious of possessing a great secret and slowly crushing the victim held in his power.

"Proceed, sir," said Gordon; "you are right so far."

"The speculating brother lost heavily, and slowly but surely he saw his fortune melting away. His wife died, leaving a girl on the verge of womanhood—their only child. A wicked thought suddenly forced itself into the mind of the last-named brother. It was to possess his brother's share of the legacy by fair means or by foul; even though life was to be sacrificed."

Warren Gordon groaned aloud and with blanched features he turned upon the narrator and in a beseeching voice exclaimed:

"Cease! I will hear no more."

"It would not do to break off the narrative at this interesting point. You must listen to me."

Wide-Awake bent a searching look upon the shrinking form upon the bed, and drawing still nearer, continued:

"This scheming brother nourished the plans he had formed in order to possess his twin brother's share of the will. Daily the idea grew

stronger upon him until it became a mania. At length he determined to remove this brother, and like a midnight assassin he lay in wait where he knew his victim would have to pass. Leaping upon his unsuspecting victim, this unnatural brother dealt him several blows, and stretched the unfortunate brother lifeless at his feet, the blood oozing from gaping wounds upon his victim's head. Seizing the body, he bore it swiftly to the river's bank, and hurled it into the tide that bore the lifeless form out toward the lake.

"One glance to assure himself that his murderous work was completed, and the assassin fled. He was the possessor of all. For a while, the mysterious disappearance of Robert Gordon created a sensation; then the affair was forgotten, yes, forgotten, except by two persons, one who saw the deed—*myself*—and by the murderer—you, Warren Gordon!"

Gordon started and gasped convulsively, and raised his hand as if to beg the outlaw to desist, but Wide-Awake apparently did not notice the act.

"After that crime, I became quite intimate with you, Gordon, and the beautiful face of your daughter had created a love in my breast that I could not master. But she refused me, scorned my offer of marriage, and you—even you, ordered me from your house! You little dreamed that I possessed a secret that you would willingly have given up all your wealth to silence; but in an evil hour I became involved in a quarrel, and in my blind fury I dyed these hands with the life-blood of a comrade. It was a wicked, cowardly murder; yet not more so than in your case, Gordon. I fled to avoid the prison and the inevitable scaffold. I fled to the wilds of the Black Hills. I joined a formidable gang, and by my daring soon rose to be leader and prime mover in the desperate Order. I have accumulated wealth, and even here in Custer City, I am looked upon as an influential man."

"We are equal here, Warren Gordon. We two should hang if we had our just deserts. You are out here to claim your brother's shares in mining speculations, and I am here to enrich myself also."

"Come, don't shrink from me; give me your hand. As I said before, we are equal. You dare not betray me if you would, and I laugh at your threats to denounce me. I have a proposition to make to you. If you value life you will listen and accede immediately."

"What is the proposition you have to make?" asked Gordon.

"The price of my silence is your daughter's hand. Being the daughter of an assassin, she certainly is not too good to be the wife of an outlaw." Wide-Awake arose, and going toward the door turned again, and in a voice which emphasized every word, exclaimed:

"I give you three days to consider my proposal. Your daughter's hand, or I reveal your secret and hand you over to justice."

The outlaw passed out through the door and stood upon the threshold an instant and repeated:

"Remember, I give you three days to consider my proposal."

The door closed and Wide-Awake was gone.

Warren Gordon turned his face to the wall and groaned aloud. A strange fatality had led him to the wild recesses of the Black Hills, where, instead of finding peace and watching the fair, innocent girl grow into beautiful womanhood, he found a bitter foe who robbed him of this priceless treasure and even threatened to reveal his crime!

Gordon closed his eyes to shut out the horrible specter of the gibbet—closed his eyes to shut out the form of his murdered brother borne along in the muddy waters of the river! No wonder he groaned aloud, for his guilty conscience held the upper hand, and his crime had tracked him down at last—tracked, and by a guilty wretch who knew not the meaning of the word pity.

CHAPTER V.

FROM THE CAVERN.

WE must now return to our friend, Dennis Flaherty, whom we left crawling away from the scene of the encounter with Wide-Awake's followers.

For a long while the cunning Irishman lay perfectly quiet, having the appearance of a dead man; but his ears were opened to the slightest sound, and, through his half-opened eyes, he observed all that passed between the outlaws and the youth.

The spot where Flaherty had fallen was probably twenty or thirty yards from the tree where the lariat was fastened, in order to hang Richard Maxwell. Dennis had resolved to save the youth by stratagem, as he now saw it was useless to contend against the number of armed ruffians that swarmed about them. It was with regret that he saw Nellie Gordon pass by in the care of several burly villains, and Dennis at once turned his attention toward Richard.

Slowly he began to creep away from the spot, intending to draw the bandits after him in some manner, and thus give Richard an oppor-

tunity to make a bold dash for liberty. He had crept but a few yards when his hand came in contact with a metal object which he grasped, and, to his delight, found it was a revolver, dropped probably by one of the desperadoes in their hurried attack upon Richard.

Dennis crept on still further and finally arose, and, at the critical moment, discharged the revolver several times in quick succession, and sped away in the darkness. The entire lot of road-agents dashed toward the spot, and followed in pursuit of the retreating footsteps. Dennis scrambled away, over rocks and underbrush, making a roundabout return to the spot where the youth had been left hanging. Occasional glimpses of the moon led him on in his flight, and in a few moments he was within sight of the fatal tree.

What was Flaherty's horror to see a tall, phantom-like figure glide beneath the tree, and cut down the swaying body! Dennis felt his short red hair rise, and involuntarily he crossed himself as he beheld the awful presence seize the body and throw it upon his shoulder, as if it had been the form of an infant, and dash away from the spot. The horrible yell curdled the blood in Flaherty's veins, and, horror-struck, the Irishman saw the fiend disappear in the gloom, and a dread silence prevailed.

"Howly saints defend us!" he groaned. "He's took the poor boy away wid him—worra! worra! Mercy on his soul!"

Dennis lost no time in leaving the "haunted" spot and made considerable headway over the crags and brambles. He had not gone very far before he felt himself falling down, down into space. He seemed to be falling into the very bowels of the earth.

Dennis uttered one cry as he disappeared through the frail covering of vines and underbrush that had masked the cavity into which he had suddenly plunged. In vain he grasped for some object to break his fall. He grasped nothing but empty air, and suddenly he struck some object, and to Dennis's great joy he had escaped unhurt, but before he could congratulate himself upon his miraculous escape he lost his equilibrium, and again shot down an inclined passage, gliding and rolling until, with a dull thud, he struck the bottom of this downward passage, and, to his great astonishment, he found himself in a dimly-lighted cavern.

The low murmur of voices was borne distinctly to his ears from a distant part of the subterranean chamber. A swinging lamp that hung from the rocky roof cast a dim light in the gloom.

As Dennis lay sprawling upon the hard floor, he glanced upward and saw the "shoot" down which he had just made the rapid entrance into the cave. Several casks, boxes, and other plunder of some ill-fated emigrant train, lay in one corner of this underground chamber. A narrow opening on one side showed the entrance into another cavern, and Flaherty concluded that he had fallen into one of a chain of caverns, one leading into the other.

Before he could explore the chamber a footfall resounded in the side passage, and a voice harshly answered some question.

"Yes, I heard a racket! Better see the cause of it," said the voice.

Flaherty waited to hear no more, but nimbly scampered toward one of the casks and leaped into it to conceal himself. He had scarcely done so when his head appeared over the edge of the cask, and he spat out a quantity of water which he had involuntarily swallowed.

In his great haste the Irishman had leaped into a huge cask filled with water, and there was no alternative but to remain there or fall into the hands of the inhabitants of the cavern. Half-drowned, Dennis Flaherty, from his damp hiding-place, watched the coming of the person whose footsteps had alarmed him. A huge bandit strode into the cavern and glanced eagerly about as if to discover the cause of the commotion. He walked over to a corner of the cave and bent over a prostrate form that had escaped Flaherty's notice.

"It can't be this fellow," said the outlaw, apparently to himself, "for he's gagged and bound just as we left him."

Then he glanced up the inclined passage, and seemingly satisfied with his observations, slowly left the cavern. Dennis strained his eyes to discover the identity of the person lying bound upon the floor, and suddenly gave vent to a joyful cry.

"Pon me sowl if it isn't the Chinese! Murder in Irish, what's he doing here I don't know?"

Flaherty leaned over the edge of the cask and tried in vain to attract the attention of the Chinaman.

"Whisht there, ye yaller-faced haythen, d'ye hear me spakin' to yez? China! China! Begorra, the opium-ateing divil is dumb as an oyster, so he is. Say! whisht there, d'ye hear me?"

The Celestial being gagged, could make no reply even had he felt so inclined, and could not even make a movement. He heard every word, and with dilated eyeballs he watched the Irishman motioning him from the cask.

"What ails him?" said Dennis. "I can see the eyes ov him like a cat in the dark, but sorra a word will he say at all, at all! I say there, Wah Ching, or Ching-a-ring, or any other kind ov a ring—do you hear me?"

Without saying another word Flaherty stooped down, and scooping up water with his hands, he managed to deluge the poor Chinaman, who made frantic efforts to avoid the shower-bath that the Emerald Islander was treating him to. Suddenly a ray from the swinging lamp cast itself upon the Chinaman's face, and Flaherty saw for the first time the cause of Wah Sing's involuntary silence.

"Arrah! he has his mouth tied up," ejaculated Flaherty. "So you're mouth's tied up, is it? If you couldn't spake to me, why didn't you say so, and I wouldn't have thrown the wather over you? But it'll do yez no harm, you dirty nagur, for ye need soap and wather, any way. Say! who the divil tied you up that way?"

Flaherty received no reply, and, tiring of hearing himself talk, he began to emerge from his watery hiding-place. Dripping wet and shivering as if he had the ague, he finally stood upon the rocky floor, and quietly approached the bound Chinaman and bent over him. It was no easy task to undo the ropes that bound Wah Sing, and Dennis cursed as he tugged at the knots. In a short time the Celestial stood upright, and, in a few moments, the gag was removed.

"Welly much oblige, Irish!" were the first words that fell from Wah Sing's lips, as he stretched his cramped limbs through which the blood had almost ceased to circulate.

"Don't mention it. Now, we've got to dig out of this, and, begorra! the only way to get out is by the way that I came in, d'ye mind?"

"Gollee! you come by lightning; you faller from up dar!" And Wah Sing pointed to the dark passage leading upward.

"That's the only way, my bucko! Come on; creep after me, and don't ye make a bit o' noise. Whisht! do you hear that? Somebody's coming into this cave again. Come along!"

Flaherty stepped into the dark opening of the inclined shoot, and, closely followed by Wah Sing, began the toilsome task of creeping upward to the outlet. Each moment the noise in the cavern below them increased, but, as yet, they had not gone more than twenty yards up the shoot. Suddenly voices sounded in the chamber below.

"Hello! the Chinaman's gone. Here are the ropes. Some one's set him at liberty!" said a voice. "Examine every nook and corner. 'Sh! there's the shoot! He may have gone up that."

"On yer life, don't make a bit of noise!" hoarsely whispered Flaherty, "but creep for your life."

Wah Sing was shaking with terror as he crawled after his rescuer, and, in his fright, he dislodged a huge rock that went crashing down the passage into the cave below. A hoarse cry arose from the depths beneath the fugitives—a cry that told Dennis that they were discovered. The next moment a ringing discharge of firearms resounded in the rocky passage, and a leaden shower flew past and about the two escaping men.

"Down on your stomach like a snake, and crawl like a good feller!" cried Flaherty, and both redoubled their efforts to gain the top of the passage.

Suddenly a noise was borne to the Irishman's ears. He stopped for a moment to listen, and turning to the Chinaman, exclaimed:

"Begorra! there's one of the ruffians creeping up after us, and he's gaining on us; we can't get away from him. Stop a moment! I'll fix him."

Flaherty held on to a clump of vines and paused breathlessly to await the approach of the outlaw in pursuit. All was still as death; not a sound, except the noise of the bandit creeping up the passage after the fugitives. In another moment the labored breathing of the pursuer was distinctly heard by the crouching Irishman, and instantly a form appeared in the gloom. Without a word, Flaherty made a sudden spring, and the next moment a scuffle ensued, and a gurgling sound escaped from the lips of the outlaw, as the Irishman's powerful hands encircled his throat. For a few seconds Dennis clasped the bandit's throat in that vise-like gripe, and then hurled the body down the passage.

The senseless body fell over and over until it reached the bottom of the shoot, then landed among the desperadoes below. A cry of rage echoed from the cavern, and another rattling shower of leaden missiles swept up the passage.

"Oh! gollee! Oh! murdee!"

"What's the matter wid you?"

"I b'leve Melican man's pistol shoot Wah Sing's pig-tail off. Me no feel 'em on head no mo'." And the excited Chinaman gave vent to a howl of agony at the loss of his capillary ornament.

Instantly Flaherty clapped his hand over the Chinaman's mouth to silence his cries.

"Stop your mouth, ye yaller-faced thief, or I'll send ye down after that villain I jist threw down below us."

CHAPTER VI.

"OVER THE CATARACT."

It will be remembered that the negro Glory was close behind Richard when he sprung down the side of the ravine to the rescue of the pursued female. Richard soon distanced the aged African, and in the darkness was lost to view.

Glory stumbled about in a vain attempt to follow in the direction taken by his young master, and losing his balance fell, or rather slid, down the side of the cañon. Glory had just time to exclaim "Hallelujah!" when further utterance was cut short by his head coming in contact with a boulder, which, being harder than Glory's head, the negro experienced the most damage from the sudden concussion, and the old African was soon unconscious. He lay in a deep crevice, and at last when he revived found the rays of the morning sun streaming into the ravine.

"Golly, how's I gwine to get out ob dis? I'se wedged in here as if I was fired out of a cannon."

Glory made desperate attempts to dislodge himself, and finally, to his great joy, succeeded in freeing himself, and commenced the difficult task of climbing out of the rift into which he had lain throughout the night.

Once more out of the cañon, the negro began searching for an outlet toward the wagon-road.

"If I only had 'Dixie' wid me," said he, "we'd soon find our way home. Dixie's de smartest dog in de worl'; he can do most anything but talk. He'd soon show ole Glory de way back to de town. I wonder what's become of Master Richard? De last I see'd o' him he war a-jumping from one rock to anudder jist like a nanny-goat. If anything's happened to him dis nigger don't want to live any longer. I'll commit susanside by letting de Injins sculp my brains out. I wish dat I hadn't left de dog at home. Dat animile is too smart to be left to home anyhow. Hello! what's dat?"

The deep baying of a dog was borne to the negro's ears. Glory listened for a moment and gave vent to a shout of joy.

"Dat's Dixie's voice sure as I'se a living nigger."

In another moment a huge black Newfoundland dog leaped from the tangled underbrush and sprung upon the negro, barking and showing every sign of joy.

The dog and the negro rolled over and over upon the rocks, in embraces of genuine delight.

"Hold up dar! Hold up, Dixie! You'se too glad to see me, and you'se choking ole Glory most to death."

Glory finally disengaged himself from the dog's embrace, and seating himself upon a rock, motioned Dixie to be quiet. The dog seated himself before the old negro, and gazed wistfully into his black eyes.

"You'se asking 'bout Master Richard. I can tell jist by de way you moves your eyes," said Glory. "I don't know whar he is; but me and you is got to find him."

Instantly Dixie snuffed the air and seemed eager to dash away among the defiles.

"Hold on; don't be obstropulous! Wait till I gets my gun," said the negro.

Glory soon recovered his rifle, and turning to the huge dog, exclaimed:

"Go ahead! Find Master Richard!"

With a joyful bark the dog sprung forward into the narrow defiles of the ravine, and Glory followed, as fast as his infirmities would allow.

"Hold up dar, Dixie! 'You'se going too fast for dis ole nigger. When you get de rheumatiz, you won't be so spry neither. Wait dar, until I cotch up to you! Dat dog's gwine clean crazy."

Dixie stood motionless until the negro approached, and then bounded off again, but would come to a halt when Glory implored him to desist.

Leaving the sable pilgrim and his canine guide to pursue their way through the ravine, we must return to the young engineer whom we last saw borne away by the terrible figure that had rescued him from the fate of hanging.

When Richard recovered his senses, he found himself in what appeared to be a circular apartment formed of skins and bark. He was lying upon a buffalo-robe, and from the curious roof a few stray sunbeams were forcing themselves through several narrow apertures. Weapons of savage warfare were hung upon the walls, and the bones upon the floor convinced the young man that the occupant of the curious apartment had recently finished a repast. Part of an antelope hung upon the wall, and several gourds of water stood in one corner.

A fainting sensation crept over the young man as he attempted to arise, and a dizziness took possession of his head that made the objects in the room swim about him as if he was under the influence of liquor. Then he remembered all that had transpired—the conflict with the outlaws and the rope about his neck—then the choking sensation. After this all was a blank.

For awhile he lay upon the floor gazing upon the sides of the chamber, and made another effort to arise. This time he succeeded in stand-

ing erect. Though faint and feeble he managed to reach the side of the small chamber, and drawing aside one of the skins that formed the wall, he gazed out and started back with surprise.

Below lay a desolate valley. Wild crags loomed up on all sides. The lodge seemed to be perched far up above the stupendous crags that met his gaze. The truth dawned upon his mind, and a closer inspection showed the manner in which the lodge was built. Four tall pine grew in a clump upon the pinnacle of a precipice, and amid the topmost branches of these pines was the structure in which Richard now found himself! The dense foliage hid it from view. By means of stout branches a floor and roof had been constructed, while the walls were formed by the skins of wild animals.

The manner of reaching this elevated retreat was by means of the stout vines that grew about the trees and branches. It was a most wonderful piece of architecture, and thus hidden among the thick branches of the pines it was almost impossible to discover it. Who was the occupant of this curious retreat? These and many other thoughts forced themselves into Richard's mind as he peered forth from this lofty retreat into the wild valley beneath him. One thing was certain, and that was that the inhabitant of this aerial abode had rescued him from hanging, and had borne him to this refuge. Richard could not explain the mystery in any other manner, and it now remained to see who was the mysterious being that dwelt in this strange place, far from the haunts of civilization. Richard seized one of the gourds and drank a copious draught of the cool water; and feeling refreshed, he set about leaving the prison-like retreat.

Pushing aside one of the hanging skins, he stepped out among the branches and prepared to descend. The youth remembered that he was unarmed, and before descending he again entered the lodge, and was fortunate in finding a loaded revolver.

Securely placing the weapon in his belt, Richard seized one of the stout vines, and began making his way to the crags below. He soon reached the foot of the trees, and, glancing up, saw how ingeniously the retreat was hidden. He carefully noted several landmarks in order to remember the spot, and then began to descend into the valley.

He had gone scarcely a dozen yards when the whir-like crack of a rifle sounded among the crags, and the yell of a savage quickly followed—a cry that echoed among the bleak rocks, then all was as still as death. The four pines stood clear against the blue sky, and, as Richard glanced toward them, he saw a sight that startled him and caused him to gasp with surprise. Clinging to the vines of the trees and rapidly ascending into the wild abode among the branches, was the awful figure of the creature that had appeared to the young explorer during the storm—the phantom that had so appalled him on that dreadful night!

The horrible figure, with its long white locks, appeared for a moment clinging to the tree, then disappeared into the foliage. Richard turned from the spot and hastened away. Onward he pursued his flight, scarcely knowing in what direction he went, when the sharp click of a rifle caused him to halt suddenly, and the next moment the gleaming barrel of a rifle was leveled full at his breast; a coarse, brutal face peered from the stunted bushes, and its owner finally stepped forth into full view and blew a shrill blast upon a whistle.

"Don't move a step, or you're a goner!" exclaimed the ruffian.

Richard started back, but before he could draw the revolver from his belt a dozen forms seemed to rise from the undergrowth, and a circle of leveled rifles hemmed him in.

Taking advantage of the youth's astonishment, one of the ruffians slipped a lasso over Richard's head and thus secured the youth's arms, and once more the young man was a captive.

"Well, Rodman, this is a great haul," said one to the persons who had blown the signal. "The captain will be delighted to see him; won't he?"

"You may be sure he will," said Rodman. "We took great care to tie him up so he'd hang easy, but it seems that he escaped the picnic we had arranged for him. But, come along, boys; this is equal to a treasure-box, for the captain's interested in this young man. Lead on there, and keep your eye on the prisoner."

Slowly the group descended into the valley. Richard realized that he had fallen again into the clutches of the outlaws, and that it would be useless to resist against such odds as now encircled him. In a short time the party reached a plateau, overlooking one of the deepest cañons in the entire range of mountains. A deep, rapid stream rushed past the plateau, its waters swollen by the recent rains into volumes of ungovernable seething whirlpools and cascades. Further down the stream leaped from its rocky bed to the glen beneath. The falls were probably not more than forty feet in height, but the mass of waters descended in a cataract of foam that

roared and echoed in that dismal vicinity. Upon the banks of this stream was the rendezvous of the bandits, and as the captors and the prisoner drew near, a number of the band pressed forward to gaze upon the captive.

A figure emerged from the doorway of a log hut, and approached the group. It was the outlaw chief, Wide-Awake. One glance at the youth, and a curse broke from the villain's lips.

"You have escaped the rope only to meet death in another form!" he shouted. "And your mode of death will be novel and interesting to all who shall witness it. You have heard of Mazeppa and the manner in which he rode to death? I have the same fate in store for you."

Richard drew back from the villain, who stood before him with anger inflaming his brutal countenance.

"Yes, I have the same fate in store for you, but on no horse that I can spare for the occasion, so I have substituted something else that will answer my purpose just as well. Here, bring the prisoner to the banks of this stream!" shouted Wide-Awake.

Instantly Richard was seized and forced toward the edge of the turbulent stream. A huge log lay upon the bank, one end swaying as the angry waters rushed beneath the part submerged in the stream.

"Bind him upon that log!" cried the bandit. "I'll treat you to a sight that will be sensational enough to satisfy you all."

Richard was forced upon the fallen tree and secured, Mazeppa-like, upon it by means of the lariats. He lay helpless upon the log, while the group of outlaws seized the other end, ready to launch it into the mad waters.

"All ready! Cast the log into the waters!" shouted the bandit.

One splash, and the log with its victim bound upon it was pushed far out into the foaming waters, and then it was borne upon the swift tide toward the cataract. The roar of the waters sounded in his ears. The log careened in the vortex of waters, and, turning a sharp angle, came to the very edge of the cataract. One moment it remained poised in mid-air, hanging over the mad, raging waters ere it leaped below with its helpless victim!

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER STRANGE DISCOVERY.

THE bandits gave vent to shouts of exultation as the log was whirled down the stream toward the cataract. Their yells were borne to Richard's ears, and he closed his eyes as he neared the dreadful abyss of foaming waters.

A sharp turn of the stream hid the log and its bound victim from the gaze of the ruffians; and in another moment the tree trunk shot forward and hung in mid-air over the torrent. Then it stopped in its mad career. A projecting branch had in some manner caught among the rocks forming the verge of the cataract, and thus held the log over the vortex of waters. The tree swayed right and left, and each rush of the current threatened to dislodge it and send it below. Richard, from his perilous position, could see the terrible death in store for him; no human being could be plunged into that caldron of angry waters and still live.

The deep baying of a dog smote upon his ears. The sound arose far above the noise of the cataract. Glancing toward the banks of the stream, he saw a huge black animal swimming toward him. The beast was making a desperate effort to prevent himself from being carried over the falls and reach the log upon which Richard lay. One glance was sufficient. A low murmur of thanks ascended to Heaven as the helpless man glanced at the animal.

"It is Dixie!" he said; "and the poor beast will be carried over the cataract."

But Dixie kept straight on, and in a few moments he had reached the end of the log that was fastened among the rocks, and the noble dog leaped upon the log and crept out toward his helpless master, uttering howls at every step. Dixie soon reached Richard, and the brute manifested his joy by licking the face of his master and barking. Suddenly he seized the lariats binding Richard, and with his sharp teeth began eating through the thongs that bound Richard to the log.

Dixie tore at the lariats, and in a short time Richard felt that his arms were free. He sat upright, and with Dixie's aid soon removed the remaining thongs that held him fast.

Another danger presented itself to Richard. It was the almost impossible feat of swimming to the banks without being carried over the cataract. Our hero was still in an exhausted condition, and death again stared him in the face. The last thong fell from his limbs, and the youth was pondering upon the best way to reach the bank, when a rifle cracked and a bullet whizzed past his head. One glance toward the western bank told Richard that the bandits were waiting to finish the work they had commenced. Several ruffians appeared upon the bank and, with leveled rifles they sought to obtain a good aim at the figure upon the log.

Richard sprang from the log, followed by Dixie. A rattling discharge of rifles followed this act and the leaden hail swept over the youth and his dumb companion. The log, now

freed of its weight, dashed madly over the falls and plunged below. Richard struck out manfully but the volumes of water were surely bearing him over toward the swiftest part of the falls. He grew more feeble and was upon the point of allowing himself to be swept by the tide when a familiar voice shouted:

"Strike out, Master Richard, only a little more and you're safe, bress de lam!" A pair of strong arms reached out to him and Glory seized the fainting man and drew him up on the bank.

A cry of rage and disappointment broke from the lips of the ruffians congregated upon the opposite bank, and a volley of firearms followed. The zip, zip of the bullets cut the foliage of the trees above Glory's head. The negro drew Richard into the underbrush safe from the fire of the enemy. Glory produced a small flask and held it to the lips of the exhausted man and forced some of the liquor down his throat.

"Don't be afeerd of de rum, Massa Richard; drink some! Dat will make you feel like a new man. T'ank de Lor' you are safe, anyway, and me and Dixie is de two happiest people on dis yearth."

Glory turned to the dog as if to have the animal corroborate his statement. Dixie wagged his tail and licked the hands of his prostrate master, and evinced his joy by all the means known to the canine species.

Richard, after a short rest, revived, and the little party began their journey through the dense woods that skirted this portion of the Black Hills.

The afternoon was near its close when Richard shot some small game by the aid of Glory's rifle, and the negro soon had a fire burning briskly and the three friends sat down to a hearty meal. Glory acted as cook, and Richard did ample justice to the meal.

"Glory, now that I am refreshed, I can tell you that I have an object in view. A beautiful young lady is now a prisoner in the hands of those horse-thieves and outlaws. She made an attempt to escape but failed. I believe it to be my duty to release her from the rascals who now hold her a captive. To tell you the truth, Glory, I am now in love. In love with the beautiful lady that I saw fleeing from the outlaws. I have made up my mind not to leave this portion of the Black Hills unless I free her. Glory, these Hills are full of mystery. I believe that there is a series of underground retreats leading from one range of hills to another. We shall have hard work before us, but I am determined to release that fair girl. What do you say?"

Richard looked questioningly at the old negro.

"I'se wid you, Massa Richard, and so is Dixie; anything dat you says is law wid us; isn't it, Dixie?"

The dog answered by a short bark, and Richard patted the noble animal's head as he concluded:

"Very well, we will begin the search at once. I have no clew, and will have to trust to Dixie's sagacity and our own cunning. We are close to Lightning Creek, and it is in this locality that the road-agents hold forth. So, come along, Glory. Keep your ears and eyes wide open and we may gain much information. Confound these wet garments, they feel uncomfortable."

Richard led the way, followed by Glory, who hobbled after him, while Dixie trotted at his heels, and at times ran in advance of the two men.

"Massa Richard, 'sh! I see'd something move in de bushes right ahead of us!" whispered Glory, suddenly stopping and seizing Richard's arm.

The youth halted and gazed in the direction indicated by the negro. A few feathers appeared above the tops of some stunted bushes. The owner of the head-dress had not stooped enough to conceal the feathers. Quick as thought Richard brought his rifle to his shoulder, and aiming below the feathers, fired. A yell of mortal agony followed the discharge, and our hero sprang into the clump of bushes. A powerful savage lay in the death-struggle upon the earth. Richard recognized the fellow as one of the Indian allies of the outlaw band. A formidable bowie-knife was grasped in the hand of the fallen savage, and a pistol in the leather belt told that white men had supplied the red-skin with the latest improved weapons. Richard transferred the huge knife into his own belt and Glory appropriated the pistol.

"Look out, Glory! we're not far from the bandits' lair. This fellow was doubtless acting as a sentry. These outlaws are hand in hand with the savages of these Hills, and ply them freely with rum in order to retain them as allies. Move carefully. Be careful that we don't fall into some snare!"

Richard again led the advance and they slowly proceeded. The way grew more difficult and at times huge crevices in the rocks yawned at their feet and fallen trees barred their passage. Over all these obstructions our friends pursued their way slowly and carefully. Richard's object was to arrive in the neighborhood of the secret ravine where first he had encountered the

outlaws. Suddenly the youth dropped to the earth among the dense undergrowth, quickly followed by Glory who held Dixie to prevent the animal from going forward. A dead silence followed, and Glory whispered: "What's de matter, Massa Richard?"

"Sh! I heard the low hum of voices, and a step further might have proved fatal to us," replied Richard, and, raising himself into a creeping position, he began to move forward in the direction he had indicated to Glory.

Motioning the negro to remain where he was, he crept toward the edge of a crag that overlooked a hollow, and glanced below. The place appeared like a deserted quarry. Rank weeds and vegetation grew about the dislodged boulders, and heaps of dirt and stones. The entire scene had the appearance of some abandoned mine, work or quarry.

Richard listened a few moments and again the hum of voices reached his ears. The sound proceeded from immediately beneath him. Under the projecting crag upon which he lay, stood two men, in earnest conversation.

By reaching far over the edge of the crag, the observer was enabled to see part of the space beneath the spot where he lay. Stout beams supported the rocky roof, and a windlass was fixed between these beams. A deep dark hole appeared in the rocky flooring, and a mining bucket attached to a stout rope, stood beside the cavity, ready to be used in descending the gloomy depths below. By aid of this windlass persons ascended from or descended into the mine below.

Richard drew back at this discovery.

"I will leave you here to watch this entrance," said a voice. "Don't be caught napping. Spies are out, and unless we use vigilance we will be in trouble. The girl is safe enough, and can never hope to escape from these intricate caverns. Guard well this outlet. Summon one of the Indians to aid you in working the windlass. Remember, if you hear the bell, to come down the shaft at once. If I signal, it will be because I need you."

"Are you going down the shaft?" inquired the other voice.

"No, I'll enter by the other inlet. Remember what I've told you. If you hear the bell, descend the shaft at once. Matters have grown so that we need to be on the alert, day and night. Oh! for the good old times when we roved among these hills free as the mountain air and masters of the territory!"

"Yes, captain; times is changed," said the second voice, in tones of regret. "But we still own the best part of it yet. People that go through these hills must pay toll and present us with the best kind of horseflesh."

"That's very true, but we must be upon our guard. That imp I sent down the cataract tied to the tree has escaped again. Curse the fellow; he has as many lives as a cat! But he will not escape me the next time he falls into my power."

The bandit leader strode from beneath the crag, and Richard drew back among the dense bushes.

"Keep your eyes open, and get help to work the windlass."

A few more words of instructions and the outlaw chief made his way over the heaps of rubbish and ascended the steep sides of the Hollow. The young man quickly returned to where Glory awaited him.

"I've made a discovery! I want you to crawl to the edge of that crag. Keep Dixie with you. Watch that ruffian that is under the crag. Don't move or betray yourself. I have found out where the lady is imprisoned. Go and watch the fellow stationed under the crag."

"Whar is you gwine, massa Richard?"

"I'm going to follow that villain, Wide-Awake. Wherever he can enter I will follow. I'm going to beard the lion in his den."

Richard arranged the formidable knife in his belt and silently glided after the retreating figure of the desperado.

CHAPTER VIII.

"DIXIE ARRIVES IN THE NICK OF TIME."

SILENTLY the young land proprietor followed the bandit chief, as the latter forced his way over the debris that appeared in all directions. Now and then the towering form of the desperado would lose itself beneath the shadows of the cottonwood trees, but again appear to the searching glances of the youth who followed in pursuit.

Wide-Awake kept straight ahead, and, after almost an hour's journey, suddenly came to a halt. A wall of granite seemed to bar his passage. The outlaw glanced about, then quickly approached a mass of vines and creeping ivy that grew up over the face of the rock. Hastily thrusting the vines aside, an aperture in the mountain appeared. Into this opening the road-agent entered, and the mass of ivy fell like a curtain before the entrance and hid the bandit from view.

Richard stepped forth from the spot where he had observed this transaction, and boldly approached the hidden entrance. Pushing aside the vines he entered the opening, and found himself in a narrow passage leading into the

very heart of the mountain. The entrance was pitch-dark, and he groped in the gloom, slowly proceeding and listening to the footsteps of the outlaw in advance.

The passage seemed to lead down into the earth itself, and Richard was upon the point of halting, when a faint light appeared far in the deep gloom beyond. Cautiously he made his way toward this beacon. He now passed through several small caverns, but the entrance or passage he was pursuing seemed to lead through them all. The light grew brighter, and, in a short time, Richard had reached the limits of a large vaulted chamber. A torch, fastened in a crevice, shed its light upon the scene.

He peered into this chamber, but no signs of life greeted his view. All was as still as the grave. The young man stepped into this chamber, and soon discovered the entrance of another subterranean chamber. Into this passage he slowly crept, and drew back as the light from this new vault-like place shone full upon him.

Another step, and he would have betrayed himself.

A fire was burning in one corner of the chamber. Its warmth served to dispel the chill that pervaded the place. The roof loomed far above and shone like a living coal of fire. The light shining upon the metals contained in the rocks, forming the roof, caused this beautiful appearance, that forced a cry of admiration from the spy as he beheld it. A dark opening appeared in the roof of this cavern.

In the center of the chamber stood the desperado, and a few rods from him was the slight figure of his beautiful captive. How beautiful she seemed to Richard as she stood defiantly before the burly form of the road-agent.

Richard thought he had never before witnessed such a vision of loveliness. Even the ruffian seemed awed by this picture of feminine beauty, for he stood in silent admiration, gazing upon her, little dreaming that other eyes besides his own were fixed upon the face of Nellie Gordon.

"I have returned to pay you another visit. When last we met I believe I told you of my intentions," said Wide-Awake; "but since then there has been a change in the outlook. I have news for you."

"Indeed? What news can you have that will interest me?" asked Nellie.

"Your father—"

"What of him? Speak; tell me of my dear father."

"He is safe—safe in my care," responded the outlaw. "He is now a prisoner, and will remain one until by your word he goes forth free."

"My word?"

"Yes. I have once before told you that you should be mine, but I would rather take you willingly as my wife, but forcibly if I must. Now I wish to propose this: become mine, and your father leaves this retreat, safe and free."

The outlaw told a deliberate lie concerning Warren Gordon's captivity, but he knew that Nellie's love for her father would induce her to make almost any sacrifice for his sake.

He awaited her reply. Already a look of savage triumph seemed to play upon his coarse features as he watched the beautiful girl as she apparently debated the bandit's proposal. He leaned forward to catch her reply, as the rosy lips parted to speak.

"You say that my father is now your captive?" she softly asked.

"Yes; where the light of day can never reach him, but you have to speak one word and he is free."

"You have not harmed him?"

"No! He is anxious for your safety. I have spoken to him of our union and he will not oppose it."

"Villain!" she exclaimed; "do you think that my dear father would consent to such a sacrifice? Do you think he would accept life or freedom upon such terms? No! he would kill me first, and I, I would rather hold this hand among the flames of that fire, until it withered in the heat than place it in yours, as your wife."

"That is a very pretty speech!" said the desperado, "but it makes no impression upon me. Listen to me, Nellie. In the several years that I have led this wild life, I have accumulated wealth enough to live in affluence for the remainder of my life. Every wish of yours shall be gratified. You shall live like a queen. I will abandon my comrades—all—all for you. Speak! Is your answer yes or no?"

"No! a thousand times no! Do you think that your ill-gotten gains can tempt me? As for your love, I dispise and scorn it. I could not love you if I would."

And the beautiful girl turned from him with a shudder.

Richard's heart leaped with joy as he heard the words, and a savage cry escaped from the lips of the bandit at the declaration.

"You will repent those words," he cried; "you will yet sue upon your bended knees for one look of kindness from me. Remember my words, I have sworn to make you mine and by fair means or by foul, you shall be my wife."

"Leave me!" exclaimed Nellie; "your presence is distasteful to me. I would rather be alone."

"One word more, Nellie; I have not yet spoken of this secret. It concerns your father's welfare—nay, his very life itself. I hold a secret which should I breathe it to the officers of the law would consign him to a prison."

"My father guilty of crime?" cried Nellie. "I will not believe it. This is another artifice; I have given you my answer—go!"

"I am not in a hurry! These apartments are mine; I am master here, not you; you are merely my guest. You shall soon be mistress here, but until we are man and wife, I will rule here. Now, listen to me: Years ago, a band of adventurers found their way into these Hills. They discovered gold in quantity, and among other things a *cavern of gold*—gold enough to enrich every man, woman and child in America. These adventurers were annihilated by the savages. We find traces of them everywhere. This cavern was once their home. But one man alone in the universe possesses the secret of the vast wealth contained in the cavern of gold. That man is myself. You can share this wealth with me. Be mine, Nellie, and wealth such as you never even dreamed of is yours."

Wide-Awake drew back and breathlessly awaited Nellie's answer. He had played his trump card and if that failed naught but force remained.

"You are wasting time. I scorn wealth and all you can picture to my fancy. I hate you—positively hate you, and would rather die than become yours."

"Rash girl! Do you know that you are in my power?" Do you know that I can force you to become mine? Your chances of escape are very slim. These caverns are guarded by my faithful followers. Your cries fall unheeded upon their ears."

Wide-Awake stepped forward and in his anger seized the hand of the heroic girl who had enraged him:

"I want your final answer—will you be mine? Yes or no?"

"No! villain; no! Release my hand!" cried Nellie, as she attempted to free herself from the outlaw's grasp. The ruffian heeded not her cries, but grasping the slender hand in a vise-like grip, again thundered his question:

"Are you mine? Speak! None can save you, not one—"

A form darted from the gloomy sides of the rocky chamber. A stunning blow resounded through the cavern, and the outlaw chief fell headlong to the floor. A scream broke from Nellie's lips, and the next moment she was clasped to Richard's breast.

Instantly Wide-Awake was upon his feet. The blood streamed from a gash upon his cheek, and his face presented a horrible appearance. He blew a shrill blast upon a whistle, and, turning to the youth, he drew a huge double-edged bowie-knife.

The hurried tramp of some one advancing resounded close at hand, and the ruffian's face gleamed as he heard the footfalls coming to his aid.

In a voice of rage, he shouted:

"Hands off that girl, and surrender at once, you whelp!"

Before Richard could frame a reply, another person bounded into the rocky chamber.

It was Wide-Awake's right bower, Rodman.

The new-comer brandished a long-bladed bowie, and with the whoop of an Indian, he placed himself beside his leader.

Richard gently placed Nellie away from him, and, drawing his murderous-looking knife, faced the two desperadoes. With a yell of fury they sprung upon him, and the clash of steel rung through the cavern.

The three men in mortal combat occupied the center of the chamber, while Nellie breathlessly watched the uneven combat, scarcely able to move from the spot. The sparks flew from the blades, but the young man met every thrust dextrously. It was a most thrilling scene—*two against one!*

Suddenly Richard brought the heavy blade full upon the crown of Rodman's head, and the villain fell, stunned and bleeding, to the floor of the cave. Wide-Awake sprang to a hanging rope, and pulled it violently. The faint tinkling of a bell resounded far above, and a confusion followed.

Rodman made an attempt to arise, and struggled to his feet.

With an oath, the outlaw captain again attacked the youth. It was plain to Richard that Wide-Awake had summoned help from above, and it flashed into his mind that the opening in the roof was the identical spot where the outlaws entered, by means of the windlass and bucket.

A dark moving mass now appeared, coming down through the roof. It was the bucket descending. Richard's heart sunk within him, for he could not hold out against such odds, and armed but with a knife.

Wide-Awake saw the bucket descending, and with a demoniacal yell sprung with redoubled fury upon Richard, followed by Rodman. The

bucket was but twenty feet from the floor when a growl and deep bay echoed through the cave; a dark shaggy form leaped from the bucket, and springing upon Wide-Awake, it seized him by the throat and bore him to the floor in a desperate struggle. At the same moment Richard again struck Rodman a powerful blow and the scoundrel fell prone upon his face.

Richard turned to see who was the deliverer, and a cry of joy escaped him.

"'Tis Dixie!" he shouted. "Wide-Awake summoned the wrong person that time—"

CHAPTER IX.

THE IDIOT INTERPOSES AGAIN.

WHEN Richard sprung after the retreating figure of the outlaw chief to follow that worthy, it will be remembered that he instructed Glory to watch the fellow that Wide-Awake had posted at the windlass under the overhanging crag. Slowly the negro crept to the verge of the cliff, and in a lying posture he obtained a good view of the ruffian beneath him.

"Don't make a noise dar, Dixie!" hoarsely whispered Glory to his canine friend.

"Dat fellow below will hear ye, and den he'll 'spicion that sumfing is wrong. You hears me?"

The intelligent brute glanced into the negro's face, and his very look seemed to say—"I'll be cautious."

Suddenly the ruffian at the windlass uttered a peculiar cry—the sound of a wild turkey calling its mate. Glory knew that the fellow was signaling to some comrade, and judged rightly that he was calling the Indian. But, that noble red-man was past all calling; his body lay cold in death among the rank weeds and brush. Several times the signal was repeated and the outlaw impatiently awaited a reply.

"Dat Injun will nebber answer you if you calls from now till you is baldheaded," thought Glory. But, to the negro's dismay, a form appeared in the shrubbery and made its way toward the cliff. The signal had failed to bring the Indian, but one of the band, by mere accident, chanced to be in the vicinity, and was now rapidly approaching his brother ruffian.

In a few moments they were beneath the crag, and the murmur of their voices was distinctly heard by the sable listener above.

Glory kept one hand upon Dixie, but that was almost useless, for the sagacious brute snuffed danger at hand, and lay quietly peering over the cliff, with his large eyes fixed in the direction where the outlaw had disappeared.

It was plain to the negro that the outlaw was repeating the instructions he had received from Wide-Awake, and the new-comer was listening attentively.

The faint odor of tobacco smoke was borne upward, and Glory came to the conclusion that the two worthies were quietly indulging in their pipes. Probably an hour slowly passed. The negro grew restless, and was about to arise when the tinkling of the bell beneath resounded in his ears. It was the signal for help agreed upon by Wide-Awake and the fellow at the windlass.

Instantly both ruffians sprung to their feet and seized the handles of the contrivance and pushed the huge bucket to the verge of the shaft. Glory made a flying leap to a mountain ash tree growing upon the side of the cliff, and the tree, bending with the negro's weight, brought him to the foot of the crag. Dixie bounded from boulder to boulder, and ere the astonished ruffians could comprehend the situation, Dixie had seized one and bore him to the hard earth. Glory hobbled forward, and clubbing the rifle, brought down the stock upon the other villain's head, and felled him to the earth. Rushing over to where Dixie was struggling with the other one, Glory soon ended the conflict by one blow of the heavy rifle.

Both ruffians were now out of the way, and the bell was ringing violently. The negro rushed to the windlass and shoved the bucket into the shaft-opening. Before Glory could calculate what to do, the huge dog sprung into the bucket and Glory, with a loud shout, lowered the brute into the cavern. Before it could reach the bottom of the mine chamber, Dixie leaped from the bucket and seized Wide-Awake, and bore the ruffian to the floor of the cavern. The instant that Glory had lowered the bucket into the shaft, two men appeared in the open glade before the cliff.

"Arrah, there's the devil himself, pulling up sulphur from the place below!" exclaimed the foremost. "Saints defend us! Run, Wah Sing! run for yer life, or he'll nab the both of us!"

But, ere the two men could decamp, Glory turned and shouted to them:

"For de Lor's sake, gemmen, don't leave me. My massa is down dis place, and I'se afeard dat de villains will murder him."

Flaherty—for it was our Celtic friend and the Chinaman—paused, and being assured that Old Glory was not his Satanic majesty, they approached the old negro.

"Who's down in the well?" asked Dennis, peering down the gloomy opening. At that moment the clash of steel was heard proceeding from the dark depths beneath, and the sound of voices was borne upward. The faint bark of a dog arose from the cavern beneath their feet.

"Dat's Dixie," shouted Glory, "and you bet dat he is mighty busy jest now."

Glory stooped over the yawning aperture at his feet and shouted:

"Are you down dar, Massa Richard?"

Richard heard the voice of the negro, and at the same time heard also the hurried tramping of feet that echoed through the adjoining passages. He knew that help for the outlaw leader and his comrade was approaching. Not an instant was to be lost. Each moment the footsteps grew nearer and the chances of escape for Richard, less and less. Dixie was still engaged in a struggle with Wide-Awake. Richard glanced at the huge bucket and saw his only chance of escape.

From each passage leading into the cavern, came the hurried footsteps denoting the rapid approach of the desperadoes. Seizing Nellie, her defender gently bore her to the bucket, placed her within, and took his place beside her. Seizing the rope he swung it violently and shouted:

"Haulaway! Quick! Quick! Glory!"

To his great joy the unwieldy bucket began to slowly rise.

Dixie sprung away from the prostrate outlaw and bounded into the ascending conveyance. Not a moment too soon, for when the bucket had neared the ceiling of the cavern, a score or more of armed desperadoes burst into the chamber from every passage, and hastened to the side of the overpowered outlaw.

"Fire! fire upon them," he gasped, and pointed upward to the bucket that was now disappearing in the aperture in the roof.

A ringing, deafening volley of firearms resounded among the rocky aisles of the caverns and the bullets flew like hail about the fugitives. Curses, loud and deep fell from the lips of the enraged villain as he saw his prey thus eluding him.

"Don't let them escape!" he roared. "A thousand dollars for that man, dead or alive, and a fortune to the one that secures the girl! Away with you—all—and let them not slip through your fingers!"

The exhausted ruffian sprung to his feet and ranted in the most violent manner and at the end of the sentence, he fell headlong to the cavern floor in a paroxysm of rage.

Each ruffian dashed away by the nearest exit to the world above—bent upon securing the reward for they knew that Wide-Awake's word was as good as a bond in this case.

Glory, aided by Flaherty and Wah Sing, worked at the windlass with a vengeance, and amid the discharge of firearms below, they drew the bucket, with its load, safe to the side of the shaft. Dixie sprung out and Richard bore Nellie from the conveyance.

"Not a moment to lose. They are upon our track, and unless we are careful we shall be surrounded and captured. Come! follow me!"

Richard clasped Nellie in his arms and sprung away, closely followed by Flaherty and Wah Sing. Glory and the huge dog brought up the rear, and the little party sped away from the dangerous locality. Each moment the way grew more difficult, and in a few seconds the fugitive stood upon the verge of a precipice that barred his way. The little party halted an instant and as they did so, a chorus of shouts smote their ears and the crack of a revolver sounded close at hand.

"We are tracked. It is either fight or run. Running is out of the question, as we can't go another step forward on account of this precipice," said Richard.

"Then be jabbers we'll fight!" cried Dennis. "The Flahertys never could live without fighting, so, come on, ye black muzzled baboons! I can lick a dozen of yez myself."

Dennis turned to the approaching ruffians, threw off his coat and spat upon his hands. A bullet whizzed by his ear. Dennis dodged.

"Hold on there! Fight fair, can yez? Come out here and leave your pistols behind yez. I'll soon show yez what kind of a man yez have to fool with."

Dennis capered about with his fists doubled up, but another bullet was the only answer to his challenge.

"Here, Massa Richard, here's a place," and Glory pointed to a large cleft in the rocks.

It led to a series of cliffs above the entire mass, forming a natural fortification.

Glory entered the narrow passage, followed by Wah Sing. Richard entered next, and bore the fair girl to this place of safety. Once upon the summit of their natural fortress, the little party could hold out against a small army.

Glory shouted to Flaherty, and the noble-hearted Irishman backed slowly into the cleft, and then swiftly ascended toward the summit, but midway he turned, and rolling a huge boulder into the cleft, he completely barred the way. The outlaws could not enter through the cleft, and our little party could not again escape by that passage.

The situation was now one of peril and disheartening to our heroes; for, should the ruffians wish, they could starve out the little garrison of the natural fort, or in some manner exterminate them at pleasure. They were protected for the

time being, but without food or water they could not long withstand the assaults. The intense heat parched their tongues and they eagerly glanced about for even a pool of water among the rocks; but not even the recent rains had left a trace of the precious fluid in the cavities of the surrounding rocks.

Each time that they exposed themselves, a bullet from the watchful outlaws would flatten itself upon the rocks, very close to the person aimed at. It soon became evident to Richard that part of the ruffians had separated from the party, and were searching for some less dangerous approach to the summit of this cliff.

"They have gone to seek another approach to this place," said he, "and unless we make a bold dash for liberty, we will be caught like rats in a trap."

"Begorra, they'll never catch this Irish rat!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Wah Sing wishee had rat. Irish rat or Melican rat all samee to Wah Sing," softly said the Celestial.

"Hallelujah! See what I found!" cried Glory. All approached the negro to view the discovery. He had dislodged a boulder, and the opening of some underground passage stood revealed to the little group.

"Will the mystery of these hills ever be revealed? It seems as if the entire range was but a mass of underground passages and caverns. What a strange freak of nature, but what a blessing to us!" said Richard.

Further exclamations were cut short by a shout so close at hand that it startled all. The ruffians had found the approach to the summit and were now dashing upward toward the devoted little group.

"Into this passage every one—quick!" cried Richard; and Glory and the Chinaman disappeared into the opening. Nellie followed next. The next moment the faces of the ill-looking villains appeared over the barrier of rocks and with leveled weapons dashed toward their prey.

Richard grasped a stone and flung it full at the foremost ruffian, who fell, and his revolver was flung almost at the young man's feet.

Flaherty struck another, and the next moment he was striking out right and left with his huge fists. Richard did not waste a shot, but slowly fell back toward the opening.

Flaherty understood the maneuver also, and instantly fell back and dodged into the aperture. A shout of rage broke from the advancing ruffians, and they dashed toward the spot, but, ere they had reached half-way, a wild, weird figure, seeming to drop from the very clouds, appeared before them—a horrible, fiendish creature, clothed in skins, the long talon-like fingers extended toward the murderous crew that fell back horrified and struck with astonishment.

"The idiot of the Black Hills," exclaimed the foremost ruffian.

A dense smoke suddenly enveloped the strange creature; the odor of sulphur was wafted to their nostrils; then a slight breeze blew aside the veil of smoke.

The spot before them was vacant. The strange creature was gone!

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE MYSTERIOUS RIVER.

THROUGH winding passages that seemed to descend deep into the very earth fled the little group of fugitives. Nellie was far in advance, and paused to await the arrival of Glory and the almond-eyed Celestial. Upon every side could be seen deep, dark passages, leading in all directions.

In a few moments two men issued from one of these tunnels, and a scream arose to the fair girl's lips, but she suppressed it as she beheld Richard's face. In a moment he was at her side, and, taking her in his arms, he sprung away in the darkness, closely followed by Flaherty. Glory and the Chinaman did their best to keep up, but were not so fleet as those in advance.

Suddenly a tall form seemed to rise from the very earth itself, and, assuming gigantic proportions, the figure barred their passage. With a groan of horror Glory dropped upon his knees, and the Chinaman burrowed his face into the sandy flooring of the underground tunnel.

"Hab mercy on a poor ole nigger, good Mister Debbil, and don't pester wid him. I declar' I wouldn't make even a spark of fire, if you was to frow me into your lake ob brimstone! Hab mercy, and let me go, please!" And Glory groaned in his agony.

The Chinaman was indulging in most discordant wails, and appealing to the awful figure standing in the gloom before him. At length it spoke.

"Fools, why tarry here? Why should the living fear the dead? Fly while you have the chance, or you'll fall into the hands of the Philistines! Take the tunnel to the left, and lose not a moment. Go, and remember that your preserver is the Idiot of the Black Hills!"

A blinding flash of light seemed to issue from the strange creature's hand. Glory rolled over in a fit of terror, and Wah Sing shouted at the top of his voice. A mocking laugh resounded

from the deep gloom beyond; the negro staggered to his feet, and, seizing Wah Sing, both dashed away from the vicinity of the spot where Glory had seen his Satanic Majesty again.

"Bress me! Did you see de thunder and lightning dat he carried in his hand? I declar, I believe the lightning struck near me somewhere! I feel kinder scorched."

A peal of demoniacal laughter again resounded, and ere its echoes had died away, a person sprung from a side passage, bearing a long, glittering blade in his hand.

It was one of the desperadoes who, by a short cut through the numerous tunnels, had arrived in time to intercept Glory and his Chinese companion.

"Surrender!" shouted the ruffian; but, ere he could speak another word, a pistol-shot rung through the dismal passages, fired by an unseen hand.

Glory saw the ruffian leap into the air convulsively. A small red spot appeared upon the outlaw's forehead, and he fell prone upon the hard flooring. Another peal of fiendish laughter sounded close at hand, then a deathlike stillness followed.

Glory and the Chinaman sped past the dead body and proceeded in their flight.

Once more they owed their safety to the strange creature who had announced himself as the Idiot of the Black Hills.

Far in advance was Richard, supporting the half-fainting form of Nellie Gordon, and closely followed by Flaherty.

Richard was bewildered by the numerous passages that appeared right and left as he fled through the main tunnel.

"Begorra, sir! we ought to have a map of this place," said Flaherty, who trotted after the youth.

"It's myself that's thinking we'll get lost the first thing we know!"

"Ah! what's this?"

This exclamation from Richard, who was in advance, caused Flaherty to pause and look.

They stood upon the bank of a deep, swift river, an underground stream, roaring and speeding through a subterranean channel. It barred the passage of the little group, and for a moment they stood upon the bank in amazement.

"What shall we do?" said Richard. "Our escape is cut off by this stream."

"Can't we swim?" asked Flaherty. "Begorra, I can swim like a camel. I'd swam over the Atlantic, from Ireland to America, only my uncle paid my passage, and smuggled me aboard in a barrel, and when the waves rolled the ship—"

Flaherty's blarney was cut short by a shout that was borne to their ears—a shout from the distant passages, and Richard knew that the desperadoes had entered the tunnels and were now in full pursuit. Even as the cry reached his ears, Glory and Wah Sing dashed up to them, faint and exhausted. A drink from the river soon revived the old negro, and he hoarsely whispered:

"We're goners, Massa Richard; they'se! after us, and we're all surrounded!"

"Holy smoke! look at that, will yez? Saints between us and harm, we're all going to the warm place below, in a hand-basket. Worra! worra! I wish I was home in the bogs!"

The cause of the Irishman's terror was soon apparent.

A canoe literally enveloped in a blaze of fire was speeding down with the tide of the river.

The strange color of the flames lit up the rocky passages with an unearthly light and illumined the bosom of the dark river with the glare of the fire that seemed to be consuming the canoe.

But the most appalling sight was the occupant of the craft. It was the same awful presence that Richard had witnessed on the cliff. The strange, wild creature known as the Idiot of the Black Hills.

Even as the supernatural-looking figure in the canoe drew near where the group stood in awe; the shouts of the ruffians drew nearer also.

In a few moments the flaming canoe drew up to the bank, and the voice of its mysterious occupant rung through the tunnels:

"Quick! Place the young girl in my care. Be not afraid; the Idiot will not harm her, but save her from the human wolves in pursuit. The fire will not harm her. These flames consume those I hate, but will spare those whom I befriend. Quick; trust me!"

The Idiot extinguished some of the flames; Nellie was placed in the canoe, and the wild creature seizing a paddle hurriedly traversed the river and placed her upon the opposite bank. Hastily returning, he ferried Richard and Flaherty over the swift current. Each second was now precious, as the desperadoes were hurrying toward the river. Glory and the Chinaman were upon the banks making frantic appeals to the wild ferryman to return and take them across, but that strange creature did not seem to hear their cries, but leisurely paddled the blazing canoe across the dark waters. To Glory's dismay, he saw the wild creature urge his canoe up-stream and away from the

spot where he stood. Nearer and nearer grew the footsteps of their pursuers.

"We's got to swim or get cotched! and I's gwine to chance the swimming part ob de job!" shouted the old negro, and the next moment he plunged into the river, quickly followed by Wah Sing.

The Chinaman splashed about like a drowning cat, and gulped down enough water to sink him. Each time that he opened his mouth to cry for help the waters gushed into it, choking the poor Celestial, and making him redouble his splashing and struggles to reach the shore. Glory, in spite of his rheumatic limbs, struck out like a big mud-turtle, and soon reached the center of the swift stream.

At this instant the group of ruffians in pursuit reached the bank, and a cry of rage broke from their lips as they saw the two fugitives in the stream escaping. In an instant a dozen rifles were leveled, but, ere a trigger could be pulled, a cry of dismay arose from the outlaws.

The cause of this cry was the sudden appearance of the canoe of fire. In the midst of the flames stood the awful figure of the Idiot. In an extended hand he held a blazing torch, while, with the other, he held the paddle, thus directing the canoe.

Swiftly came the flaming craft and its specter-like helmsman. The outlaws paused as this supernatural vision burst upon their view.

The burning canoe passed between the escaping men in the stream and the shore, thus shielding the fugitives.

In a few seconds, it had swept past the spot where stood the ruffians. A loud, fiendish laugh broke from the lips of the Idiot, and, as he brandished the torch, the canoe swept around a bend in the swift river, and boat and occupant disappeared as if by magic under the deep overhanging crags.

Every rifle was again raised, as the bandits recovered from their surprise. A rattling discharge followed. The lead spattered upon the face of the dark crags, and, from the depths of the tunnels, came loud peals of laughter, that caused a shudder even to the ruffian crew that listened to the unearthly sounds.

Next, a howl of rage escaped them as they saw Glory and the Celestial reach the opposite shore, and, clambering up the bank, escape under the arch-like passage into the gloom beyond. Then, each ruffian darted away seeking the nearest way to intercept the fleeing men, by some passage in which they could avoid crossing the river.

In the meantime, the negro and Wah Sing made good use of their legs; fear added rapidity to their locomotion, and they soon placed a good distance between themselves and the banks of the mysterious underground river.

It will be remembered that Richard, Nellie and Flaherty were far in advance. Richard kept straight on in the main passage, closely followed by the girl and the Celt. The faint discharge of firearms was borne to his ears and the yells of the baffled outlaws sounded afar.

A few hundred yards further and Richard saw a faint light streaming into the narrow passage, and reaching the opening, saw to his great delight that he had reached an exit to these mysterious catacomb-like passages in the hills.

In a short time the little group emerged from the gloom into the open air and rapidly descended into the valley.

Richard, who was in advance, suddenly paused and listened. The rumbling of wheels sounded in the valley below and he knew that a vehicle of some description was rapidly approaching. The fugitives hastened down in the direction of the sounds and to their great joy beheld a stage coach rapidly nearing the defile. From the windows protruded gun-barrels, denoting the fact that the passengers within were ready to repel an attack.

Richard hailed the driver. Instantly the inmates of the coach were on the alert and the clinking noise within the coach told plainly that triggers were raised and ready to discharge the weapons.

In a few moments Richard had told his story and the pale face of Nellie Gordon had influenced the passengers. Without a dissenting voice, the trio were allowed to mount. Flaherty sat beside the driver and Richard was given a seat next to Nellie. The coach rolled away en route for Custer City.

A pair of lynx eyes peeped from the dense brush on the hillside and a muttered curse fell from the hidden watcher's lips. It was the outlaw chief, Wide-Awake.

He shook his clenched fist after the disappearing coach and then rapidly approaching a horse hidden among the trees, he sprung upon the fleet animal's back and urged the beast at the top of its speed toward Custer City, but by a road known only to the road-agent and his desperate followers.

CHAPTER XI.

LYNCHED.

WARREN GORDON had almost recovered from the wound he had received at the hands of the road-agent, and he was daily growing stronger. The old gentleman was bowed with sorrow,

and tears frequently forced themselves into his eyes as he thought of the fate of his beautiful child.

He knew that the outlaw held her as a captive, and shuddered to think that the ruffian could even insult his child by his mere presence. He saw how completely he was in the road-agent's power. He could expect no assistance in Custer City, for the ruffian, in his character of the judge, and leader of the Vigilance Committee, held undisputed sway; and should he even accuse him of being in league with the outlaws of the hills, he would be laughed at for his pains. The words of the bandit still rung in his ears:

"Remember, I give you three days to consider!"

It was now the evening of the third day and Warren Gordon had little hope that the desperado would ever again seek his presence. He imagined that the bold bandit would perhaps leave the Black Hills, taking Nellie with him. Gordon groaned aloud at the mere thought.

A footstep in the room caused him to look up. Wide-Awake stood in the center of the room.

"You see that I am prompt and keep my appointments," said he.

Gordon merely shuddered as he looked into the hard, cruel features.

"I have returned for your answer. I might have wedded Nellie without your consent, but it is always best to keep in with the parents, and I wouldn't like to make an enemy of you, Warren Gordon!"

"I have nothing to say to you," replied Gordon. "Return my child to me, and allow us to go upon our way and leave these wilds."

"Oh, no! I like your society too well to allow you to depart. We are upon equal terms here, Gordon—that is, we are neither of us free from crime, and while we remain out here we are free from the law which might in any other section of the country claim us for the act of murder."

The road-agent emphasized the word murder, and a leer swept over his face as he saw Gordon cringing beneath the effects of the speech he had delivered.

"Nellie will soon become my wife, and we can then remain out here *en famille*. That's a good word, isn't it, Gordon?"

Before the road-agent could utter another word, the old man leaped from the couch, and fastening his fingers about the bandit's throat, bore him to the floor.

Wide-Awake, taken completely by surprise for a few seconds, the old man held the burly ruffian down; but the road-agent recovered from his surprise, and flung the old man from him as if he had been a child.

But, Warren Gordon still clung to the outlaw, with a grasp of desperation, in spite of the villain's attempt to free himself.

"Hands off!" he hoarsely shouted. "Let me go, or it will be the worse for you," and Wide-Awake drew a glittering bowie from his belt, and, in the next instant, he buried the blade in his adversary's chest.

Without a word, and scarcely a groan, the unfortunate gentleman sunk to the floor.

For a moment the outlaw chief gazed upon the prostrate figure, and grasping the dripping knife turned to flee. He halted for a moment as if considering what to do, and then placed the blood-stained knife close beside the inanimate body of his victim. He then approached the window; it was not more than five or six feet from the ground, as the house was built upon the range of hills that formed the only street of the town, and the windows of the rear opened upon these hills.

As Wide-Awake was about to leap from the window, one of his pistols dropped from his belt and struck the floor. Immediately an explosion followed.

Instantly there was a commotion in the house below and upon the street. Red-shirted miners swarmed in from every quarter, and hastened up-stairs to the room from whence the pistol-shot had resounded.

Wide-Awake lost no time in swinging out of the window and grasping the wood-work of the next window to the left, he drew himself into the next room, which he found to be vacant. The hurrying of many feet in the corridor below warned the outlaw that the situation was becoming critical.

But another person had been close at hand when the pistol-shot echoed through the building.

Richard Maxwell had just alighted from the stage-coach which drew up before the building in question.

From conversation with the passengers he had learned that Warren Gordon was an inmate of the hotel, and he knew exactly the location of the old gentleman's room. He had just dropped from the coach when the report of the pistol startled him. Glancing toward the rear window he saw the evil face of the outlaw Wide-Awake. Only an instant did the villain's face remain in view, but that was enough to tell the tale.

Richard seized the stout vines growing close beside the house, and immediately began to ascend to the window above. No one witnessed the

act, and the passengers had scarcely left the coach before Richard had ascended half-way, and even then he was shut out from their gaze, as he was in the rear part of the building.

While he was ascending the vines, Wide-Awake swung out from the window of Gordon's room and entered the next window. He had scarcely done so when Richard leaped into the room that the villain had just vacated, and bent over the bleeding figure upon the floor. Unconsciously he grasped the knife with one hand, and felt for the throbbing of Gordon's heart.

"He is dead!" said Richard.

Before he could utter another word the door was broken in. A crowd appeared in the doorway and surged into the room.

The bandit saw his opportunity, and adroitly managed to open his door and mingle with the crowd in the corridor.

Wide-Awake forced his way into Gordon's room just as Richard arose from Gordon's body to meet the excited and angry glances of the crowd of miners.

"Seize him!" shouted a loud voice, and the next moment Richard was in the powerful grasp of several miners, and a score of pistols were leveled at him from all sides of the room.

A subdued, hyena-like laugh broke from the lips of Wide-Awake, as he saw the turn affairs had suddenly taken, and he stepped forth from the circle of armed men, boldly meeting Richard's gaze.

"Arrest that man! See that he does not escape you!" shouted the outlaw.

"Arrested! For what?" cried Richard.

"For the murder of this old man lying dead at your feet," replied Wide-Awake; and then, turning to the miners surrounding him, he continued:

"What ought to be done with a wretch that would strike down a gray-haired old man? A villain who would dye his hands with the blood of a poor, feeble, defenseless old man?"

A roar broke from the crowd, and amid oaths came the answer, as if but a single voice had shouted back the reply:

"Hang him to the nearest tree!"

A scream—a woman's scream—resounded close at hand, and the next moment Nellie Gordon forced her way to Richard's side.

Wide-Awake's face blanched for a moment, but quickly recovering himself, he shouted to the mass of excited men surrounding him:

"Delay no longer! Take the prisoner, and let him pay the penalty of his guilt!"

"Who is my accuser?" asked Richard, as the sobbing girl knelt beside the prostrate form of her father.

"I am!" boldly replied Wide-Awake, and a smile of triumph swept over the outlaw's face.

"You—you—villain! scoundrel! Dare you accuse me of murder?" Richard turned to the miners:

"Men, there is the renowned outlaw and road-agent, Wide-Awake. He stands there among you. You know a reward is offered for his capture. The scoundrel is there, and has the impudence to accuse me of this poor old man's murder. I swear to you, that I never beheld this old man until I entered this room and saw him lying upon the floor. That villain who accuses me is Wide-Awake, and it is your duty to arrest him!"

A derisive laugh escaped the desperado's lips, and it was re-echoed by the mass of red-shirted men grouped about him.

"Ha! ha! ha! Boys, if you did not know me so well, that insane person's remark might have some weight with you. Just think of it; me, the leader of your Vigilance Association, mistaken for the rascal, Wide-Awake! Do I resemble that villain? Ha! ha! ha! I hope not. But, we are losing time. Away with your prisoner!"

"Hold!" cried Richard. "Would you carry out your threats without first giving me a trial—a chance for my life?"

"Men of your kind need no trial," said Wide-Awake. "You have been caught in the act, and a rope and tree is all you can expect. Away with him!"

Instantly Nellie Gordon's arms were entwined about Richard's neck, and with tears in her eyes she turned to the rough crew to implore mercy for the doomed man. She knelt to the desperado, but, rudely thrusting her aside, he bade the men in charge of the prisoner to hasten and remove him.

"Remember, men, I am innocent of this crime, and Heaven bear me witness that my hands are not stained with his blood. That fiend, in the form of a man, has blinded you all, but you will all see your mistake. You! Wide-Awake, remember well the words you have spoken to me: 'Men of your kind need no trial.' Remember those words, for you will hear them again."

"Enough of this talk! Take him away and let his fate be a warning to all others who murder old men."

The outlaw waved his hand and the miners began to force Richard from the room while the half-fainting girl still clung to him and shrieked to the rough men for mercy.

"You do not believe me guilty do you, my darling?" gasped Richard.

"No—no—Richard! I know that you are innocent. Oh! let me die with you!" replied the beautiful girl.

"No—live, live to bring that villain to justice, if such a thing is possible in these wild districts."

The next moment Richard was torn from her arms. With a piercing shriek she fell into the arms of the nearest miner, while the youth was forced from the room by the rabble, closely followed by the ruffian Wide-Awake, who dared not allow the prisoner to leave his sight until he had wreaked his vengeance upon him.

It must not be supposed that the miners were cruel ruffians. Their sense of right or wrong was peculiar, and had they felt that Richard was innocent they would have championed him as quickly as they had condemned him. Finding him in the room kneeling over Gordon's body, still grasping the blood-stained knife, was proof sufficient that he was guilty, and his assertions of innocence were laughed at, and fell upon their ears as the ravings of a guilty person.

With loud cries of "Lynch him! Lynch him!" the crowd passed out of the hotel and hastened toward a clump of trees. One ran ahead and swung a rope over a stout limb and hastily formed a noose in the end of the rope. A horse stood, fastened to a tree close by, and the animal was quickly pressed into service by the excited and yelling crowd. Richard was forced into the saddle and the horse led beneath the tree. The rope was soon about his neck, and the youth's hands pinioned behind him. Wide-Awake stepped back a few feet to give the signal; a miner stepped forward with a whip and raised it to strike the horse.

"All ready! Go!" shouted the ruffian.

A stinging blow fell upon the horse's flanks, and the animal leaped forward. At the same moment, a form amid the leafy branches of the tree bent downward, and with one blow of a keen knife severed the rope that was attached to the limb. The horse bounded away, and Richard, freed from the rope, was carried away at a break-neck speed, amid a roar of curses and yells of disappointment and rage from the crowd about the tree.

"Away wid you, and the devil fly away wid the one that tries to catch you!" cried the person among the branches of the tree; and the face of Dennis Flaherty beamed out for an instant, as its owner hastily scrambled into the next tree with the agility and swiftness of a squirrel.

"After him, after him!" thundered Wide-Awake. "Five hundred dollars for him, dead or alive!"

A volley of pistol-shots cracked from every side, and a storm of bullets swept over and about the escaping youth.

CHAPTER XII.

FLAHERTY SHOWS HIS HAND.

ONWARD sped the horse with the bound rider upon its back—over rocks and fallen trees, until Custer City was left far behind. Yet the yelling, hooting mob followed quickly after the horse and its helpless rider. Shot after shot flew past, some whizzing close to Richard's ears, and others serving to urge on the horse he bestrode with redoubled speed. Many of the pursuers were now mounted, and rapidly gaining upon the youth.

Had he been free to use his hands he might have directed the horse he rode, and thus escaped his enemies; but his arms being pinioned he now sat helplessly upon the saddle, unable to guide the beast in any direction.

Suddenly he felt a sharp twinge in his left shoulder, and a fainting sensation stole upon him. Richard knew that a bullet had buried itself in his shoulder, and gradually felt himself falling from the horse.

Another volley of firearms echoed behind him and the horse stumbled several times, plainly showing that the outlaws were directing their fire at the animal in order to bring him down, and thus secure the fugitive.

A mist swam before Richard's eyes. He was upon the point of falling from the saddle, when a form hobbled from the dense underbrush and hastened out to meet the horse and helpless rider. The form seized the reins and stopped the horse, then with one sweep of a sharp blade severed in twain the rope that bound Richard's arms, and struck the horse a blow that sent the beast bounding forward again.

"Go it, Massa Richard! Lor' bless you, and save you from dat pack ob debbil's imps!" shouted the deliverer, as he hobbled back into the dense undergrowth.

In the meantime, the yelling pack of pursuers swept past and continued after the youth. Richard, now free to manage the steed, urged him forward, and soon entered a deep, gloomy cañon and began to distance his pursuers. The wound in his shoulder pained him exceedingly, and the animal breathed heavier and limped. Drops of blood mingled with the flecks of foam that fell from its mouth.

The noble horse suddenly plunged forward and fell heavily to the earth, and lay perfectly

still. Richard sprung from the falling animal, and bounded away in the narrow passage before him.

Night was settling down rapidly upon the gloomy surroundings, and Richard trusted to the darkness in order to evade his enemies. He knew that the miners in pursuit would spare nothing to recapture him, and he felt certain that many of the outlaw captain's men had mingled with the crowd of excited miners, and had shouted loudest for his blood, and were even now urging the others in this chase; so he hurried onward and in a short time reached the banks of a rapid stream, into which he plunged and made for the opposite shore. The waters were but waist deep, and he soon struggled to the bank, faint and exhausted.

He was about to seek a clump of trees, when he caught the faint glimmer of a light in the gloom beyond. Again he started forward, and his eyes were gladdened by the sight of a small cleared space in which stood a rough log hut from whence the light proceeded.

He staggered forward and fell exhausted to the earth as the door opened and a female form emerged from the hut. The figure rapidly approached him and bent over the senseless form at her feet.

"Bless me, I thought it was uncle coming back, drunk again!" exclaimed the woman. "But it's a stranger, and his face is as pale as a ghost! I wonder what ails him? I'll get him some water."

Instantly she ran into the hut and returned with a gourd of cool water, which she held to the lips of the youth and forced some into his mouth. Slowly he revived and the large blue eyes opened.

"Save me—I am pursued—save me if you can!" he slowly exclaimed.

"Why—what is the matter?"

"I have been accused of murder, but I swear to you that I am an innocent man. I have made my escape from the mob, but I am tracked, and unless you conceal me I will be taken and killed without mercy. Don't hesitate; I am not guilty. That fiend, Wide-Awake—"

"Wide-Awake!" interrupted the girl. "Is it he that is pursuing you? Then I will indeed conceal you if I can. I know him to be a villain, and my uncle is but little better. This is his house, and very often they meet here. They will not think of searching for you here, and I think I can save you. Come!"

She assisted Richard to his feet, and slowly helped him into the hut.

At this moment a faint yell came upon the night air, and Richard knew that his foes were still upon his trail. The girl led the way to a partition, and opened a narrow door.

"Enter this room. It can be fastened from the inside. It is my own room, and no one will enter it."

Richard seized her hand and murmured his thanks as he entered the room and closed the door behind him, and barred it.

Had he fallen into a trap? Who was this girl that mingled with the rough outlaws of the Hills? What assurance had he that she would not deliver him over to his pursuers?

These and other questions forced themselves upon the youth as he stood in the dark room alone. At any rate, he would die struggling to the very last, come what might.

Suddenly he bent forward to listen; his heart stood still as he plainly heard his pursuers ride into the open space before the hut, and dismount. Loud voices sounded close at hand, and instinctively Richard sought for his weapons. He was unarmed—wounded, faint, and fairly trapped.

A heavy footfall resounded in the next room. Richard applied his eyes to a chink in the door and breathlessly listened. He recognized Rodman's voice—the same desperate ruffian he had encountered in the cavern, and Wide-Awake's right-hand man. Several other members of the outlaw league followed after Rodman, as he entered the front room of the hut.

"Hello, gal!" exclaimed Rodman, "have you seen any thing of a person prowling in this neighborhood? We're after a feller that's given us the slip, but we're close after him. The captain would give any amount to have that feller in his clutches again. Have you seen any one close about the hut?"

"No, uncle; no one has been near the place since you left."

Richard blessed the noble girl who had just uttered the falsehood in order to shield him.

She was true to her promise and would not betray him.

"Are you quite sure you have seen nothing of the person we're after?" asked Rodman, turning again to the girl, fixing his eyes full upon her face. She withstood the searching glance, never moving a muscle of her features. By the light of the candle upon the table Richard, from his place of concealment, could observe her face.

"I have seen no one," she replied.

"Very well, then. Come in, boys; sit down and rest yourselves. It's very strange. We have traced this Maxwell to this vicinity, and

we've now lost him. He can't be far off, for he's wounded and has to foot it. When daylight comes, we'll nab him sure!" said Rodman, and that worthy sat upon a stool and his followers were soon seated about the rough table, and a flask of liquor placed in its center.

"I can't believe he's far away," said one of the desperadoes; "and I wouldn't at all be surprised if he was under this very roof, hid away some place!"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Rodman. "Didn't the gal say she saw no one? I believe her, for she wouldn't lie to me. Here, Winnie, get some fresh water."

Mechanically the girl took the bucket and passed out of the room to obtain the water. Her face was as pale as a sheet, and she trembled for the safety of the wounded fugitive.

As she passed out from the hut toward the well, she imagined she saw a form glide behind one of the trees, a dozen yards away, but, as the outlaws' horses were picketed close at hand, she came to the conclusion it was one of the league acting as a sentry.

The figure gliding behind the tree mumbled to himself:

"Bedad, I came near being seen that time, so I did," and disappeared beneath the shadows.

The instant that Winnie left the room in quest of the water, Rodman arose and approached the door in the partition and tried it. He started back surprised.

"This is her room, and it is fastened from the inside. That looks bad. It won't do to alarm the occupant if he is there; but I have a plan." Then Rodman's voice sunk into a hoarse whisper, as he bent close to the villain who had intimated that the fugitive might be concealed within the hut.

"Take your knife; creep quietly to the rear of the hut; there is a window that opens into that room. Enter quietly, and dispatch him if he is there. I don't wish to alarm the girl or show her that I distrust her, for she possesses too many of our secrets for us to make an enemy of her. Go!"

Silently the villain glided from his place at the table, and passed out into the open space before the hut as if to look after the horses. He saw the lithe form of the girl at the well, and, watching his opportunity, he crept away in the gloom toward the rear of the hut, grasping his glittering blade, and eager for the bloody work laid out for him by Rodman.

So low had the remainder of the conversation been carried on, that Richard had been unable to distinguish the concluding remarks and instructions spoken by Rodman; nor had he noticed the villain's absence who was even now at the window, peering in cautiously, and watching the young man as he stood at the door observing the outlaws in the front room of the hut.

Quietly the scoundrel at the window opened the narrow sash, and began crawling into the room.

At this juncture Winnie entered the front room with the cool water, and the group of outlaws began talking and laughing in order to drown the noise of their victim should Rodman's emissary find him. The desperadoes drank from the flask, and, amid boisterous laughter, proposed Maxwell's health.

At this very moment the ruffian dropped from the window lightly to the floor, and, grasping his knife still tighter, peered toward his unconscious victim ere he sprung upon him to deal the death-blow.

A second form appeared at the open window, and instantly began to creep through in the same manner.

At this instant a peal of laughter sounded from the outlaw group in the front room, and the would-be murderer sprung toward Richard; before he had gone half-way the form in the window leaped upon the floor, and in another moment had seized the assassin, and, wrenching the knife from his grasp, instantly plunged it into the outlaw's very heart.

Silently, but with lightning-like rapidity, had this all occurred, and Rodman's emissary lay dead upon the floor, while Richard's preserver stood above him, still grasping the reeking knife, and listening to ascertain if the slight noise had reached the outlaws in the front room.

Richard turned, prepared to defend himself, and started back several feet at the strange sight presented to his view.

"Not a word, Master Richard; I've cooked his bacon for him. The Flaherty family's on deck, and always in the nick of time!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WAH SING SEEKS A NEW BOARDING-HOUSE.

DENNIS FLAHERTY stood in the center of the dark room, and by the aid of the faint starlight struggling through the open window, Richard saw that the noble-hearted Irishman's finger was pressed to his lips to enjoin silence. Twice that day, had he interposed in Maxwell's behalf, and saved his life. Richard stepped toward Flaherty and grasped his hand.

"Niver mind about thanking me now. Save yourself while you can. You're wounded, and can't fight, so take the old saying for advice:

'He that fights and runs away will live to fight another day.' Go! Ye'll find horses out there. Get onto one of them and away wid you!"

"And leave you here to shoulder everything? No!" said Richard.

"Don't worry about me. I've as many lives as a cat, anyway. When I slid out of the tree I followed after the pack, and you see that I didn't lose track of you; so go on now. I'll be around near you when you least expect me. Whisht! hear them! What fun they're having! This spalpeen at me feet will never join in their larks any more. Go on; don't be standing there like a stone."

Another loud peal of laughter arose from the group in the front room. Richard seized the Irishman's hand and gratefully pressed it within his own, and passed out through the window. Softly and carefully he made his way among the horses. The least sign of alarm among the animals might betray him, and bring the villains upon him; but the horses remained perfectly quiet while he selected a powerful animal from the lot and was soon in the saddle, and in a few moments both horse and rider had disappeared in the belt of cottonwood trees surrounding the outlaw's hut.

As soon as Richard had disappeared from the window, Dennis stooped over the dead bandit at his feet. At that moment a rap sounded upon the partition and Rodman's voice was heard calling to his emissary.

Instantly the Irishman's plans were formed. In order to gain time for Richard he had resolved to attire himself in the dead outlaw's garments, and boldly enter the front room. Trusting to the dim light and the befuddled condition of the rascals to prevent a recognition.

In a few moments he had transferred the outlaw's garments upon himself and made his exit through the window, and rapidly passed around to the front door of the hut.

"What the deuce keeps Tom in there so long," impatiently cried Rodman, as he paused to listen for some sign of a struggle beyond the partition. But a deathlike stillness reigned there, and ere the desperado could utter another word, the door opened and Flaherty, attired in Tom's garments, entered and boldly strode to the table and sat down upon a stool.

"Did you find him?" asked Rodman. The face of the girl turned deadly pale, as, with parted lips and fixed eyes she breathlessly awaited the reply.

"You bet I did! and I fixed him," coolly replied Flaherty.

A slight scream escaped from the girl as she beheld the blade that Dennis held in his hand, still reeking with the life-blood of his victim. Every eye turned toward her and Rodman fixed his basilisk eyes upon her.

"Sol! You thought to deceive me, eh? But Tom was too vigilant, entirely. You concealed the man we were in search of and denied his presence, but he has been found and now lies a corpse in yonder room. As for you, I will put you in a safe place." Then turning to the supposed outlaw, Tom, he continued: "Did he show fight?"

"Not a bit!" replied Flaherty, disguising his voice as much as possible. "I just slid into the room and before he could say Jack Robinson I had the knife into his ribs and he kicked the bucket as politely as ye plaze—and the villain's gone to the place where niver a one ever gits back at all, at all."

During this speech, Rodman had been intently watching the Irishman and he started as if he had made a startling discovery, but the next moment he was cool and collected as if nothing had occurred to occasion the surprise.

"Boys," said he, "we've tracked the spy known as Richard Maxwell, and our trusty comrade, Tom Blake," and Rodman emphasized the name, "has settled his worldly accounts. We have Tom's word that the man we're after lies in the next room dead. But, I have a question to ask you. Suppose a person was to sneak among us and obtain our secrets and even dye his hands in the blood of one of our comrades, what would be his fate?"

"Death!" shouted every voice except Flaherty's, who sat eagerly gazing upon Rodman during this harangue.

Instantly the desperado drew his formidable bowie, and fixing his eyes upon the Irishman, shouted:

"There's your man!" and pointed full at Flaherty. "There he is! Do you not see the cheat? He is attired in Tom's clothing, and has blinded us. Tom's blood cries for vengeance. Down with him!"

In a moment all was confusion. Flaherty leaped to his feet, and seizing a tin cup dashed it over the candle and extinguished it. All was dark, and a terrific struggle followed in the gloom. Dennis fought toward the door and flung it open. As he reached the open space he beheld, lying upon the ground, a short, stout club. In a moment he had seized it, and the next instant was dealing blows right and left as if in the midst of a ruction at Donnybrook fair.

Rodman grasped a rifle from a corner of the hut and dashed out into the night air; but, ere

he could pull the trigger, a huge shaggy animal bounded out from among the cottonwoods, and with a terrific growl sprung upon Rodman and fastened its teeth about the outlaw's throat and bore him to the earth.

Rodman uttered a piercing shriek as the beast bore him down, and, amid savage barks, shook him as if he had been a mere rag. It was the huge Newfoundland, Dixie, and the dog was lacerating the outlaw in a terrible manner.

For a few seconds the ruffians were seized with consternation, and Flaherty made good use of the respite, for he leaped upon the nearest horse, and, flourishing his club like a wild Indian, he dashed away, yelling and whooping to the dog. The canine gave Rodman a parting shake, and then like an arrow discharged from a bow, away he went after the Irishman, leaving the cursing group far behind to assist Rodman into the hut and dress the wounds inflicted upon him by Dixie.

Rodman's rage knew no bounds when he found that Flaherty had escaped, and that Maxwell, too, had flown.

The desperado swore at everybody around him, and in the midst of his fury a horseman rode into the open space before the hut and flung himself from the horse and dashed into the room where Rodman lay. It was the bandit captain, Wide-Awake. His face was beaming with exultation, for he firmly expected to find Maxwell a prisoner.

"Well, have you got him safe at last?" exclaimed the road-agent. "I felt sure you would succeed."

"Succeed! Does this look like success?" and Rodman groaned as he pointed to his lacerated throat.

"Why! What has happened?" asked Wide-Awake, as a faint suspicion crossed his mind that Maxwell might have worsted his comrades.

"There's been the deuce to pay," replied Rodman. "We got onto the fellow's track and found him cooped up here."

"And you finished him?" eagerly demanded Wide-Awake.

"No; I sent Tom into the room to give him a touch of cold steel, but it seems that somebody slid into the room and turned the tables onto us. Tom lays in the back room, dead."

"And the prisoner—Maxwell! Where is he?" gasped Wide-Awake.

"Gone! Give us the slip."

A yell, like the cry of a wild animal wounded to death, broke from Wide-Awake's lips, and he gnashed his teeth in fury. He capered about like a lunatic, blasphemed, and rained down abuse upon the heads of his followers.

"You're a nice pack of noodles to allow one man, and he wounded, to hoodwink you all and escape. Mount, every one of you, and capture that man dead or alive!" roared the outlaw chief.

"It's no use getting mad, captain. That won't better it nohow," groaned Rodman.

"Look at me! See the way I've been used! I'm completely chawed up by that dog. Curse the brute, I'll send a brace of bullets into his carcass on sight. But, don't worry, captain; Maxwell can't get away from us. He's given us the slip for the present, but we know these hills, every foot of them; he can't keep out of our way; we're bound to nab him!"

This seemed to pacify Wide-Awake; gradually his fury cooled down, and he hearkened to Rodman's account of the manner in which the group had been duped by the Irishman, and the manner in which he had managed his escape.

The outlaw captain swore to rid the world of Flaherty, the moment he again looked upon that individual.

"I, too, have a strange story to narrate. You remember when we prepared every thing to hang this Maxwell? Well, I had the girl, Nellie Gordon, placed in safe hands, and I started to see that the hanging was carried out. We all know that some one cut the rope, but in the excitement that ensued, we could not ascertain who it was. Now, listen to me. We left Gordon's body lying dead upon the floor of the room where the murder took place. Well, when I returned to the house, myself and others wended our way to the room and, would you believe it, Rodman, the room was empty and the body gone!"

A shudder seemed to pass through the outlaw's stalwart form as he concluded his narrative.

"The body gone?" exclaimed Rodman.

"Yes, and no trace of it left. Now, I know that Gordon was dead, and the question is—who has stolen the body from that room? The people in and about the house swear that no one entered the room, and if the body left the building it must have been by the open window. I tell you, Rodman, this is a mystery that I can't understand."

"Maybe the girl knows all about it," suggested Rodman.

"No; for she was in care of two of our men and was under lock and key. Some one has spirited away the dead, and it puzzles me to know the reason. But I have this to console me. The girl is without a protector and totally under my care. She is now safe in my power, and she will not escape me this time."

"Are you going to keep her in the place where she is at present?" asked Rodman, partially rising.

"No, indeed! I will bring her to this place. It is safe, and not easily found. Once here she can't evade us very easily."

"But I am afraid that the girl in the next room, my Winnie, is not to be trusted. It was she who concealed this Maxwell."

"It does not matter whether she is false or true. All she can say of me up at Custer City will not amount to two pins. I stand too solid up there. I direct the Vigilance Committee, and all complaints must come to me. You see how nicely we hold the trump cards in our hands."

A slight commotion at the door attracted attention, and swiftly gliding toward it, Wide-Awake flung it open and seized a person by the throat. The man was in the act of listening, and uttered a yell of surprise as the outlaw grasped him as if in a vise of iron, and drew him where the rays of the candle could fall upon the intruder's face.

"Le'm go—le'm go—me, Wah Sing, and look troo hole in door to find out if you keepee hotel; me wantee board-house."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW GLORY DECEIVED THE OUTLAWS.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the murder of Gordon and the mysterious disappearance of the body. Although Wide-Awake's emissaries had searched far and wide, no traces of the body had yet been discovered. Nellie, broken-hearted, refused to be comforted, and gave way to her feelings of sorrow and anguish. After the terrible scenes enacted at the hotel the fair girl remembered nothing, and when she revived she found herself a prisoner and again in the power of the road-agent.

The building in which Wide-Awake now held his captive was on the outskirts of the town, not far from the mining camp. One of the outlaw captain's most trusty followers occupied the shanty, and under his care the beautiful girl was placed. This member of the league was a Mexican, known as Carlos, a most villainous specimen of the Mexican guerrilla, steeped in crime and well-versed in villainy, crafty and cunning as the fox, and more cruel than the tiger. For years he had swayed the band of outlaws, until the advent of the villain who now commanded. Carlos and Rodman well deserved the titles applied to them of Wide-Awake's "right and left bowers."

An old negress attended to Nellie's wants, but the Mexican kept strict watch upon the occupant of the shanty. The negress brought food at regular intervals to the fair prisoner, but it remained untouched.

"You must eat something, or you're gwine to die of hunger," protested the negress, as she surveyed the repast; "I see you ain't eat a crumb of that meal. Now don't cry, missy, but have a little snack. I've got to be keeful how I speaks to you, for dat Mexican is always a-spying 'round me and don't 'low me to speaks to you unless it's 'bout what you need. Don't blame me, missy; I'd help you away if I could, but you couldn't get out of dis place, nohow. Dat Mexican is always in de front part of de shanty, and he has a couple of bloodhounds all ready. Gosh a-mighty! I never want to hab dem dogs after me!"

The old negress shuddered and was about to resume her conversation, when the door opened and the evil face of Carlos appeared in the doorway.

"Enough of this talk. I told you never to speak to the lady except it was actually necessary. Now, leave!"

The Mexican waited until the negress had collected the dishes, and watched every movement until she hobbled out of the room. He then advanced toward Nellie, and exclaimed:

"In future you will not converse with that old wench without permission. I am here also to announce that the captain will pay you a visit within a short time."

"Will you please answer a few questions?" said Nellie, as she saw the Mexican about to depart.

"That depends upon the nature of the questions. What are they?"

"Tell me, sir, has my poor father's body been recovered?" and while tears dimmed her eyes the poor girl bent eagerly forward to catch the Mexican's reply.

"I don't know," said he sullenly, and hastily closing the door after him the villain departed. Nellie heard the key turn in the lock and again gave way to sorrow.

Several hours passed and the shadows of night were nearing when the door again opened and Nellie's heart almost ceased its throbbings as she recognized the form and features of her persecutor. The poor girl shuddered as the outlaw chief entered and stood for a moment regarding his beautiful captive.

"Your humble servant, Miss Nellie Gordon!" exclaimed Wide-Awake as he bowed. "You see I am prompt. I promised to call again in a few days, and, Nellie, I have but a few moments to spare. Listen to me. Several times you have been at my mercy, and through some

unforeseen circumstances you have upon each occasion escaped me. But, I have determined not to lose you again. This very night you become my wife."

Nellie sunk upon her knees before the outlaw. She well knew that the villain would spare no means to carry out his threat, and the poor girl saw no escape except by appealing to the villain.

"Spare me! You cannot force me to wed you. Such an alliance would be mockery and I would rather take my own life than consent to be your wife. Let me depart. Enough blood has been shed. My dear father's life has been sacrificed for my sake, and Richard Maxwell has fallen a victim to your crime and violence."

Wide-Awake gazed upon the fair girl, and a leer of triumph swept over his features.

"Allow you to depart," said he, "after all my trouble—after all the risks and all the blood that has been shed? No, indeed! I have sworn to possess you; mine you shall be, Nellie Gordon, and no living person can take you from me."

The outlaw fairly hissed the concluding words and the trembling girl shrunk into the corner of the room.

"Don't be frightened, Nellie! I don't mean to harm you," said he, as he noticed the pale features turned mutely to him. "I only mean that you shall know that it is useless for you to resist or expect assistance. Your poor father, alas, is no more. His assassin has paid the penalty of his crime; so you see that you are utterly alone, and I must be henceforth your protector, and when once you are my wife—"

A low moan from the parted lips of the girl interrupted the outlaw, and drawing nearer, the outlaw observed that Nellie had fainted. He rapidly approached the door and opening it called:

"Ruth! Ruth!"

A shuffling step sounded without, and the next moment the old negress's dusky face appeared in the doorway and she entered the room.

"See to the young lady. She has fainted! Stir yourself!" cried Wide-Awake.

Ruth hobbled over to the girl, and after a few moments she had partly restored the insensible maid to consciousness. The large blue eyes opened, and as they rested upon the bandit's features, she shuddered and closed the eyelids again.

"I think you'd better leave de room, massa, as de young lady seems to be skeered of you," said Ruth.

"Indeed! Afraid of me, eh? Well, I like that! Ha! ha! ha! However, I'll leave if I am the cause of her fright."

"I think I can do better if you isn't in de room," and the old wench busied herself chafing Nellie's hands and sprinkling cool water upon her temples.

"Very well; I leave her in your care. Do the best you can."

"Yes, sah; I'll do the best I can," was the reply.

Wide-Awake approached the door, and before passing out into the hallway he spoke again:

"Call me when you leave this room, so that I can lock the door."

"All right, sah."

The outlaw left, and his retreating footsteps were heard as he passed down into the next room, and his voice in conversation with Carlos was distinctly borne to the occupants of the room he had just vacated. Nellie again revived and seeing her persecutor had departed, gave a sigh of relief and then burst into a flood of tears.

It was strange to note the change that came over the old wench. She quickly hobbled to the door and listened to the voices of the outlaw and his companion, and silently approached a small door in the hallway. Quick as thought she had unfastened the bolt that secured it, and then crept down the hallway until she reached the door of the room in which Wide-Awake and the Mexican were seated. A candle was burning upon the table, and its light fell upon the faces of the two ruffians. The old negress's hands wandered for a moment in the gloomy corner, close to the doorway, and she withdrew something from the dark recess. It was a rifle. Bending down still lower, she silently removed the percussion cap from the nipple and replaced the weapon. All this had been done in a very short time, and almost before Nellie was aware that Ruth had left the room. The wench, after replacing the rifle, quietly began her retreat back to the room occupied by Nellie. As the beautiful girl glanced toward the black woman, she was astonished to see that person place a finger upon her thick lips and hoarsely whisper:

"Now den; de way is clear."

Nellie almost screamed for joy at the very thought of escape. Was the negress in earnest? Could she save her?

Nellie gazed upon the matted gray wool straggling beneath the folds of a yellow handkerchief, and the small flashing eyes that seemed to emit sparks of fire as their owner stood upon the threshold in the attitude of warning.

"Sh! de way is clear!" The wench advanced toward Nellie and for the first time she noticed the difference in features. The old negress seemed entirely changed since last she had spoken to Nellie, when bringing the noonday meal.

"Don't be askeered to trust me," said the wench, noticing the manner in which Nellie drew back from her, as she made the discovery. "Don't be askeered," she repeated. "I've hero to save you. I've risked my life to do it. I promised my dear master that I'd die or bring you out of dis place, and I'm ready to do it."

"Who is your master?" asked Nellie.

"Richard Maxwell," replied the wench, in a low whisper.

"Richard Maxwell!" repeated Nellie. "Is he your master?"

"Deed he is!"

"And you are—"

"Glory!"

With difficulty, Nellie suppressed the cry of joy that welled up to her lips. Had a thunder-bolt fallen at her feet, she could not have been more surprised. There stood the faithful negro, habited in the old quilted dress of the wench, and the entire disguise was so perfect that even the keen-eyed ruffian had been easily deceived.

"I've only got a minute to tell you how I've in here. Ruth is a fr'en' of mine, and I borrowed dese yere fixings and I sneaked in here. Neither one of dem fellers 'spects me, and I've gwine to make a bold move to get you out of dis; so come along—easy—dis way."

Quietly did the girl follow after Glory as he led the way into the narrow passage and groped into the darkened hall toward the door, holding one of the maiden's hands in his own in order to direct her steps.

It seemed an age to Nellie as they slowly moved along, and the laughter and coarse voices of the two desperadoes so close by caused her to shrink nearer to the negro, and offer a short prayer for their safe escape from the den. Glory paused at the door, and slowly began to unbolt the rough fastenings. In a few minutes the iron bolt was shot back, and Glory slowly opened the door to prevent it from creaking.

"Dar's one thing we've got to face yet, and dat's de bloodhound; but I've fixed for him," said the African. "Now, follow me."

The door swung open and Nellie had just taken a step forward, when an inner door opened, and Carlos stepped from the room into the hall.

A curse fell from his lips as his eyes rested upon the forms vanishing into the open air. The draught from the open door extinguished the candle, and both ruffians stumbled in the dark toward the door.

Carlos seized the rifle, and hastily aimed at the retreating figures. A dull snap followed the pulling of the trigger, and the Mexican hurled the weapon from him. Instantly Wide-Awake was out in the dark, open air, and shouted, stamped, and swore like a maniac.

"They're gone!" he yelled. "Where's the dog?"

"I'll unleash him!" cried Carlos; and, bounding to a corner of the shanty, he seized a rope.

A deep bay broke on the still night air, and a huge dog of the pure Russian species leaped forward to meet the Mexican. The ferocious bloodhound tugged at the rope until the outlaw led him to the doorway, and the brute snuffed the ground and howled.

"Let him go! He's got the trail!" commanded Wide-Awake. Carlos unfastened the dog, and with a blood-curdling yell, the brute darted away in the darkness after Nellie and Glory, uttering howl upon howl, while the two ruffians followed after as hastily as possible.

CHAPTER XV.

TRACKED BY A BLOODHOUND.

THE cold muzzle of a pistol pressed close to Wah Sing's temple, caused the terrified Chinaman to fall upon his knees and utter piercing cries for mercy.

"Silence!" said the gruff voice of his captor.

"So, you're looking for a boarding-house, are you? Did you expect to find one by looking through the cracks in the door? We'll give you a boarding-house, my fine fellow. Open that trap, some of you."

Instantly a trap in the rough floor was raised, and the dark opening revealed a cellar or pit beneath the den. Wah Sing was seized by several of the outlaws, and while yet he was squealing like a stuck pig, he was raised over the opening in the floor and thrown into the gloomy depths. A low wail arose from the pit as Wah Sing struck the hard floor of the underground chamber.

"Let him alone! The fall isn't enough to kill him; and if it did, it would matter but little. I want to keep the cunning rascal alive, or I'd send an ounce of lead into his yellow carcass. I want him for future use. He's mixed himself up in our affairs, and he can be of use to us. If he refuses to do our bidding he dies!"

Wide-Awake gave a few parting instructions to the men about him, and sallied forth into the open air to seek his horse. Mounting, he spurred through cañons, ravines and gullies toward Custer City.

A few straggling log shanties were built here and there on the outskirts of the mining town, and before one of these buildings the bandit dismounted. This hut was considerably larger than the rest, and almost hidden among the boulders that almost choked the valley. In fact, the entire valley seemed as if a mighty convulsion of nature had overtopped mountains and upheaved the earth into bewildering rock masses. Giant boulders were poised upon pinnacles of rocks as if some huge mechanical contrivance had been called into use by man, for the purpose. Some of the boulders were poised so evenly that the least weight would cause them to sway to and fro. Throughout the entire region the rocks and boulders assume strange and fantastic forms. Castles with embattled turrets—spires of cathedrals—fortresses of every describable shape; the result of terrible volcanic eruptions and mighty convulsions of the earth in ages gone by.

"Wide-Awake tapped twice upon the door. A voice from within inquired: "Who's there?"

"A friend!"

"A friend to who?"

"The Black Hills!"

Instantly the door opened and the growl of a huge dog followed.

"Lie down, there!" said the man within, and the huge brute drew back into the hut, as the outlaw chief stalked in.

"Hello, Carlos!" said Wide-Awake, as he grasped the Mexican's hand. "How's the girl?"

"Safe enough. She must be mighty clever to escape me and the bloodhound."

Carlos closed the door and barred it.

"Now, to tell you what has befallen us," said the captain. "We've been unlucky, and, for the first time since I can recollect, I've been tricked and baffled every way—every way but one. The girl you say is safe; she must not again escape me. Here do I remain until she is mine; I will not quit this roof until I am sure of her!"

Wide-Awake then went into details of the lynching of young Maxwell, and the mysterious manner in which the rope was cut; the flight and pursuit, and the final catastrophe at Rodman's hut.

So intent were the two ruffians in their conversation, that they failed to observe a black face that peered in upon them from the window. Several times the huge bloodhound arose, and sniffed toward the window and uttered a low growl, but the two ruffians appeared to pay no attention to the brute, until Wide-Awake concluded his narrative; then the dog bayed loud and long. The two men sprung to their feet, and the black spy slid down to the earth and rapidly moved away in the gloom.

"Something's wrong with the dog! S'pose you take a view of the outside," said Wide-Awake.

"All right," replied Carlos, and he closed the door after him.

If the brute had been allowed to follow out after Carlos, our friend Glory would have found an unpleasant pursuer; but he soon returned, and reported every thing right and quiet without.

Both men, wearied, prepared a bed of robes upon the floor, and soon sunk into a deep slumber, the huge dog remaining on guard, alive to the slightest sound during the long hours of the night.

Glory was the spy, but he decided not to attempt any movement that night, and laid plans for a bold move. What it was our readers have already ascertained. It was to watch an opportunity and enter the hut, attired as the old negro woman, and thus attempt Nellie's rescue. How well he succeeded, on the night following, we have seen, and several accidents favored his flight as he and Nellie ran side by side over the rugged masses of rocks.

"Keep up spirit, miss," he cried. "We can't make good time, but we can dodge them in the dark. I've fixed the horse so they can't use him. Dis way, dis way, miss!" and Glory seized Nellie's hand and helped her across a wide and deep chasm, crossing upon a rude log thrown over the abyss for the purpose. Once safely across, the negro rolled the log over into the yawning depths and paused as the cries of the outlaws were borne toward him on the still night air. Another sound mingled with the voices: it was the deep baying of the hound. In spite of the weapon that Glory possessed he shuddered, for he well knew the ferocious foe that was now upon their track. He had witnessed the brutes on the track of fugitives in the dense Southern swamps, and they had seldom failed to hunt down and almost destroy the poor wretches whom they pursued. Again, the long deep bay of the hound; the brute was surely upon the trail and close at hand.

"Come along, miss; dey can't cross on dat bridge no more, and dat will gain time for us. De only one I'se afraid of is dat bloodhound. If dis shot misses him we're gone! but don't be afraid. Ole Glory will die for you, miss."

Again they started forward, urged by the cries of the animal in pursuit and the outlaws that followed. Then the cries of the hound ceased, and Glory surmised that the brute had

halted at the chasm, and finding the log-bridge gone, both he and the ruffians were, for the time being, baffled!

But, ere long, the cry was again heard. By a long detour the hound and ruffians had found another way to cross the crevice, and were again upon the trail. Each moment Nellie felt herself growing weaker, and almost clung to the arm of the aged negro, who, it must be remembered, was still impeded by the gown borrowed from the old negress, and which he had not yet found time to cast aside.

"You go ahead, miss. Leave me to fight dis hound. I can gain time for you," said the negro, hoarsely, as he stopped and drew the pistol from beneath a jacket. "Go on, miss; save yourself for master Richard's sake; I know he loves you—I know dat. It's a pleasure to die for you, miss, because my master loves you."

The faithful dandy attempted to urge her forward, but Nellie refused to leave him.

"No, I will remain; I will not desert you. You have risked life itself to save me, and I would indeed be ungrateful if I now abandoned you to your fate. Here I will remain, and trust that Heaven will not desert us."

An awful bay, close at hand, now sounded, and the panting of the brute was distinctly heard.

Glory placed Nellie behind him, and nerved himself for the attack. The pistol contained but one charge. If that failed he was lost.

Scarcely had he taken his position when the glowing eyeballs of the brute were seen, like living coals of fire, in the gloom beyond. Glory waited but a second, and as the coals of fire seemed but a foot away, he fired.

There was a hurried rush as the dog leaped into the air—unhurt, and sprung toward the negro.

Nellie started back a few yards, with a scream of terror and despair. Like a tiger springing upon its prey, sprung the huge dog, and bore down the brave negro. Glory fell to the earth under the bloodhound, and gave himself up for lost. For a moment the brute paused, and fixing his glowing eyes upon Nellie, he crouched for another spring. With a fiendish yell the animal leaped toward her, and she sunk upon her knees, uttering a cry for help. Before the huge creature had fairly leaped, a rifle cracked close at hand in the dark; the ferocious bloodhound gave vent to a shrill cry of agony, and fell a quivering mass upon the rocks, almost at Nellie's feet.

Scarcely had the animal fallen, or the echoes of the rifle ceased to vibrate among the crags, when Carlos and Wide-Awake dashed breathlessly to the spot.

Wide-Awake espied Nellie, and a cry of triumph broke from his lips.

"Now, you're caged, my pretty bird, and this time you do not escape me," he shouted, as he started forward to seize her.

"Hold!" cried a ringing voice that sounded strangely supernatural. Wide-Awake and the Mexican glanced in the direction indicated by the voice, and both ruffians shrunk back, cowering at the weird spectacle presented to their view.

Upon one of the topmost boulders stood the awful creature, known as the Idiot of the Black Hills, apparently in the midst of forked flames of green fire that seemed to envelop him from head to foot.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SPECTER OF THE STORM.

For a few moments both desperadoes stood transfixed with a mortal dread that seized upon their senses, as they beheld the wild being upon the crag, enveloped in the flames that seemed to encircle him.

In one hand he held the rifle that had sent the unerring bullet into the very heart of the ferocious bloodhound. Peals of wild laughter broke from his lips as he glared down upon the dismayed countenances of the ruffians. Their consternation was but temporary. Wide-Awake soon recovered from his terror as he beheld the well-known features of the Idiot.

"Don't allow the tricks of that Idiot to frighten you, Carlos," he shouted. "Man, devil, or wizard, I don't fear him. I'll have the girl, though I wade through a river of blood. Out with your weapons and send an ounce of lead through his crazy brain, while I secure Nellie."

Wide-Awake glanced toward the spot where last he had seen the girl, and a cry of rage, disappointment, and surprise, mingled, broke from his lips.

The spot was vacant; Nellie had disappeared and Glory also! Had the earth opened and swallowed them, the disappearance would not have been more complete.

Wide-Awake and his confederate's attention had been so absorbed by the sudden appearance of the Idiot, that he had failed to notice the shadowy form that seemed to emerge from the base of the crags, and silently taking Nellie's hand, lead her into the very face of the rocky wall. And when Glory had stepped within the mysterious opening, a huge boulder silently slid into the aperture and completely closed the strange place of refuge.

Wide-Awake's rage knew no bounds, and his

wrath turned upon the wild being perched upon the boulder that was balanced upon the summit of the crag.

"Down with him, Carlos! A hundred dollars if you send a bullet through his carcass," he cried.

The Mexican, tempted by the promise, drew his pistol and sprung up the rugged side of the pyramid-like mountain and dashed toward the figure of the Idiot, who sent forth peals of mocking laughter as he saw the Mexican rushing upward toward him. In a moment more Carlos was upon the boulder that formed the apex of the mound.

A few more steps and the Mexican was almost within reach of the mocking figure before him, when a startling scene occurred. The weight of the Mexican caused the boulder to sway, and as Carlos staggered to keep his footing a blinding flash of fire seemed to leave the Idiot's hand, and the flame dashed itself into the Mexican's face.

Blinded, bewildered, he started back and reached the very edge of the boulder, and at the same moment the figure of the Idiot disappeared from the swaying rock that toppled over. A wild unearthly cry broke from the lips of Carlos as his body shot down—down into the abyss that yawned at the back of the crag—a cry that froze the blood of the outlaw chief as he heard that shriek of despair borne upward from the awful depths of the chasm. His revolver was grasped ready to avenge the Mexican, but a gloom had settled about the place, the colored fire had faded, and not even a sound came to the desperado's ears to tell him that any other living being was close by to break the solitude of that awful scene of mystery and desolation. The intense gloom added to Wide-Awake's horror; clouds hid the moon and a few straggling stars from his gaze, and the wind moaned through the trees.

Swiftly he glided from the spot and began a hurried flight toward the hut in the ravine; but ere he had gone far the rain-drops pattered upon his fevered brow and soon fell in deluging torrents. The lurid lightning now and then zig-zagged across his path, and by its electrical light he was enabled to see a passage among the fallen trees and jagged boulders.

The storm became furious, and during a vivid flash the outlaw observed a huge hollow tree and crept within its shelter. Each peal of heaven's artillery added to his fears, and a horrible cry of terror quivered upon his pale lips as, glaring out from his place of shelter, he saw a form glide through the cañon. The pale features were turned toward him. The white hair streamed into the night air as the ghostly figure silently glided past the trembling wretch within the tree. He pressed his hands before his eyes to shut out the sight, and gasped, "Warren Gordon!" then sunk almost senseless within his place of shelter. He firmly believed he had witnessed the phantom of his victim, and his teeth chattered and his knees smote together, for he well knew it was not a hallucination, and that he had seen the form of Warren Gordon pass before him. That Gordon was dead he had but little doubt, and that the ghost of the murdered man had just appeared to him he was positive, and his guilty conscience caused him to quake with terror.

Surrounded by his reckless followers, ready and anxious to obey every command, Wide-Awake was a dangerous foe and one to be feared; but, left alone in the midst of such supernatural proceedings, he shook like an aspen, and his pale features denoted the fact that, like all bullies and desperadoes, he was really a craven at heart.

He looked again, but the specter had vanished. The electric flashes now and then lit up the wild surroundings, and a sigh of relief escaped from the bandit's lips as he saw that the cause of his terror had vanished.

He emerged from the tree and resumed his flight toward more congenial quarters.

His pursuit had proven a failure and had cost the life of his most trusty follower, not counting the hound, whom he prized above its weight in gold. Inwardly he vowed vengeance upon the Idiot, and swore that his life should pay the forfeit upon the very next occasion that should present itself.

While the outlaw is pursuing his way toward the abode of his comrades, we will follow the adventures of Glory and Nellie, whom we last saw entering the secret passage.

As Nellie stepped within the narrow aperture Glory quickly did likewise, and the huge boulder sealed up the natural doorway. The girl peered into the darkness to discover, if possible, the identity of her mysterious rescuer. A few flashes and sparks gleamed for a second or two as if the person alluded to was endeavoring, by the aid of flint and tinder, to strike a light. In this he was successful, and in a moment more he had ignited a pine torch, and both Nellie and Glory started back as they beheld their rescuer. He was a tall savage, with painted features, and bedecked with feathers. Buck-skin garments covered an athletic figure, and, under the rays of the torch, he presented a wild and startling picture.

He noticed the surprise depicted upon the fea-

tures of the young maiden, and a smile flitted across his dusky countenance.

"Be not 'fraid; me friend. If you are Crazy-head's friends, me your friend, too," he said.

"Is you a real live Injun?" queried Glory.

"Yes, me Red Snake! Crawl like snake on bad Injun—on bad white man—sting—bite, and crawl away," replied the savage. "Come—follow—don't be 'fraid!"

The Indian led the way, and the others followed after him.

A long, winding passage presented itself to their view, and into this the trio proceeded until they reached the extreme terminus. Here a rough ladder led to an opening about six feet above.

The Indian led the way, and, after passing through this, they found themselves in a large, vault-like cavern. A fire of crackling twigs diffused its warmth about the place. Kegs, boxes, and articles for mining and agricultural purposes lay scattered about the corner of this underground abode.

Nellie seated herself upon a couch of wolf and bear-skins while Glory crept toward the fire to warm himself. The Indian guide inserted the torch in the cleft of a rock and had scarcely done so when a rumbling noise and grating sound came from above the dome of the cavern; then a faint yell echoed from without. A moment more and the wild figure of the Idiot appeared as if sinking down through the dome of the cavern, and turning toward the roof he shot a slab of rock over the opening through which he had descended. The slab worked upon the same principle as a trap-door beneath a stage, and by the aid of rugged steps on the side of the cavern the Idiot descended to the floor and stood in all his wild aspect before the trembling girl, and quaking negro who had encountered the mysterious figure under terrible circumstances, upon several occasions, and he now regarded the sudden appearance of the Idiot as a visitor from some torrid part of the underground regions. He was about to give vent to his terror when the awful figure strode still nearer and spoke:

"Here you are safe. The pursuers cannot enter and the dove is safe from the talons of the hawk."

He approached Nellie, and, placing both hands to his temples, he stared at the girl long and mournfully. Tears came into his eyes and slowly he drew nearer until he sunk upon one knee before her and in tremulous tones exclaimed:

"The clouds are passing away from my brain. I can see the resemblance—I can see her face—yes—yes!"

Then he started suddenly to his feet and seemed to stare into vacancy. The slight gleam of reason that had momentarily rested upon his face seemed to depart and the wild look settled upon the pale features again. He appealed to imaginary people that seemed to flit before him, and once he sunk upon the cavern's floor, begging for mercy and imploring an imaginary assassin to spare him.

Throughout all these proceedings the savage stood as motionless as a statue, watching every movement of the Idiot until the strange creature sunk to the floor; then the Indian glided to the prostrate form and tenderly raised it. Carefully as a mother would bear an infant to its couch did the savage assist the poor demented creature to his resting-place of buffalo robes, near the fire.

Nellie watched the startling scene with feelings of wonder and pity. The Idiot soon sunk into a peaceful slumber. The storm raged furiously outside, and the detonations shook the walls of the cavern almost to the very foundations. The Indian arose from the side of the sleeping man and seated himself before the fire, and pointing to the sleeping Idiot, said:

"He found me—alone—dying in the hills—starving. He took care of Red Snake—nursed me like a baby. Crazy-head saved my life and Red Snake would die to save him. He is not crazy all time—only when something make him angry. Then the Great Spirit take away sense from his head. You made Crazy-head mad. You made him like the wild tiger—and you die!"

As the savage concluded, he sprung to his feet and drew his glittering knife from his belt and flashed it before the eyes of the girl, who uttered a piercing scream and sunk almost senseless at the Indian's feet. He raised the knife and the blade gleamed for an instant in the red firelight ere the savage struck the fatal blow.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE IRISH INDIAN.

WHEN Richard Maxwell made his escape from Rodman's hut, through the instrumentality of the Irishman, Dennis Flaherty, he urged his steed into the belt of cottonwoods and, finding he was not pursued, he directed the animal into the wild gorges, leaving the rough road far behind him to elude his pursuers, should any follow upon the trail. The young man was still weak from hunger and loss of blood, and it was with difficulty that he retained his seat in the saddle.

He allowed his horse to pick his way over the

broken country; through the deep streams that now and then crossed the pathway he had marked out for himself. The moon lent enough light to enable the fugitive to see the wild surroundings through which he was proceeding, and mile after mile was soon placed between the outlaws' glen and the escaping man.

He was now in a locality seldom trod by the foot of the white man, unless of the reckless men that formed the powerful league commanded by Wide-Awake. These desperadoes fraternized with the savages infesting the hills, supplying them with arms, liquor and information, sending the murderous red-skins like tigers upon the little wagon-trains or groups of miners journeying through the hills, robbing and destroying all those who were so unfortunate as to fall into their hands, urged in this by the outlaw league, and often assisted by these renegades, who claimed the lion's share of the spoils, and shielding their savage allies in every manner when an attack was made upon them by troops or honest miners.

As no military post had yet been established, the savages and their white confederates reigned supreme, and a reign of terror prevailed throughout the entire range.

Richard drew rein upon the verge of a deep ravine, and was about to dismount and lead the horse when the plaintive cry of the whip-poor-will sounded close at hand. The cry was repeated from several different points, and then followed the cry of the night-hawk.

The truth flashed upon him at once—Indians were signaling!

Before he could dismount the sharp click of rifles brought ready to fire sounded at his side, and, as he turned, several rifles in the hands of dusky figures were leveled full at him, and the guttural tones of the foremost savage warned him to refrain from making an effort of resistance. The least movement would result in death, and as he was in an exhausted condition and unarmed, he allowed the circle of savages to draw nearer, and in a few moments he was a bound prisoner in their midst.

One stalwart Indian seized the reins of the horse and led him in advance of the group that now defiled into the cañon. Not a word was spoken by the captors, and the lonely midnight march was broken only by the sound of the breaking twigs beneath the feet of the savages and their captive, or now and then by the screech of the owl, or the shrill call of some night bird, disturbed by the advance of the silent group.

An hour passed by, and, at the extreme end of the cañon the savages paused and signaled. The signal was shortly answered, and all moved forward again.

Under the overhanging crags that arose like a wall upon either side of a deep swift creek was the camp of the Cheyennes, a hostile, marauding tribe infesting the Hills. The scouting party with their captive was soon among the groups that arose from the camp-fires to greet their arrival.

Richard was secured to a stout mountain ash, and the rest gathered about the fire with their pipes, and the inevitable "fire-water" soon put in an appearance. From the spot where Richard was secured he could observe the circle of red marauders as they sat about the fire and eagerly emptied the flask of its ardent contents.

A half hour passed, when the monotony was broken by a peculiar whistle, and shortly afterward two horsemen waded their horses into the creek and crossed over to camp. Richard's heart sunk within him as he recognized in the new-comers two of Wide-Awake's trusty villains—doubtless two who had followed the young man's trail in the hope of securing the outlaw chief's promised reward.

The two mounted bandits rode beneath the overhanging crag, and in an instant vacated the saddles and joined their red brothers in crime.

A hearty greeting followed between the two outlaws and the Indian who acted as spokesman for the savage group.

"White brothers bring strong water?" was the first inquiry. A gleam of satisfaction and delight shone in the savage's eyes as the foremost desperado produced a canteen, and the "red brother" proceeded to gulp down its contents, while his less fortunate comrades flocked around him, and amidst an uproar of choice dialect implored the holder of the flask for a chance to investigate the quality of the liquor.

Suddenly the eyes of the tallest outlaw rested upon the bound captive at the tree, and he leaped into the air and gave vent to a shout of exultation.

"Look there, pard! Does my eyes deceive me? There's the chicken we're after, and the reward is ours."

"Correct! He's our lottery-ticket," answered the other, and both shouted again and danced with delight, as visions of the reward swam before their eyes, with none but themselves to share it.

The two outlaws alluded to were brothers, and two of the most unscrupulous rascals unhung—villains that would stoop to any crime or meanness to carry a point. No wonder they rejoiced to think they had Richard Maxwell in

their grasp, and that none of their lawless comrades could claim a share of the reward.

Both were tall, desperate, cunning as the fox, and more dangerous than the adder. Always armed and acting in concert, they were feared by their comrades and prized by the outlaw captain as two of his most precious rascals for desperate work.

Ceasing their manifestations of joy, the two ruffians approached Richard.

"Well, my spring chicken, you're roosting in a good place, ain't you? Thought to gi'n us the slip, eh? We're like a wolf after fresh meat; and you can see for yourself how close we came after you, eh, Zeb?"

The outlaw addressed as Zeb merely replied, "You're shouting, pard!" while his brother continued his remarks.

"If we was to leave you to the Injins, they'd roast you—wouldn't they, Zeb? but we ain't so cruel. We'll take you back to your friend, Wide-Awake, and he'll treat you to a neck-tie sociable, and there'll be music by the string band—eh, Zeb?"

Both ruffians laughed loud and long over the pun perpetrated, and rejoined the group of savages, who were silent witnesses of the interview. The eldest outlaw readily purchased the white prisoner from the savages upon payment of another flask of brandy, which was soon produced from a mysterious pocket as the entire party sat about the fire.

The two brothers sat facing Maxwell, so that they could observe his slightest movement. What little chance of escape that had remained was now swept away, as the two ruffians scarcely moved their eyes away from the captive.

The effects of the fiery liquid upon the savage raiders became apparent to the prisoner, and an incident now occurred that aroused again his hopes of effecting an escape.

The savage who had acted as spokesman for his party managed, by an adroit movement, to empty into the flask a small quantity of the powdered leaves of a plant, known to the tribes of the Far West as the "sleeping herb." It quickly produces drowsiness. These leaves imparted their power to the whisky, and, of course, formed a powerful sleeping draught.

This was exactly what the savage wished to produce and administer to the two ruffians. His reasons for doing so were based on the belief that both outlaws had concealed about them more of the "fire-water," and by plunging both into a deep sleep he could search for the concealed flask, and both he and his swarthy comrades could have a grand jollification.

A few minutes after the two brothers had drunk from the drugged flask, they evinced a strong desire to sleep. They made several attempts to remain awake, but finally succumbed to the potent power of the plant, and were soon oblivious to all that was passing around them.

As soon as they fell upon the sod asleep, the tall savage crept to their side and began his search for the concealed whisky. A cry of joy broke from his lips, as he discovered the flask that he had anticipated finding, and instantly carried it to his lips, and a gurgling sound followed. After a long draught, he passed the liquid to his comrades as they sat about the dying embers of the fire. They scarcely heeded the presence of the captive, so wrapped were they in the flask.

Richard was bound to the tree by stout thongs that almost cut into the flesh, and the more he struggled to free his hand, the deeper the cruel thongs sunk into his wrists and arms.

Again he lost heart and was passively submitting to fate.

A semi-intoxicated savage arose from the fire and reeled into the thicket close at hand, to gather dry twigs to replenish the fire. In the awful stillness that followed, Richard imagined he heard a dull thud and a suppressed groan, and concluded that the Indian had fallen, and would remain there.

For this accident Richard felt grateful, for the camp would soon be plunged in darkness and perhaps he could then make a more successful effort to escape.

Again his hopes were dashed, as he saw the reeling savage emerge from the thicket, and stagger toward his comrades at the fire.

The drunken Indian bore an armful of twigs, and approaching the fire he cast them upon the dying embers, and then sat down, but in a spot where the light could not shine upon his features.

One by one the savages about the fire sought reclining positions, and their deep breathing told the captive that they were in the land of dreams.

Probably twenty minutes elapsed, when the savage who had gathered the firewood arose and bent over his slumbering comrades, pausing over each as if to assure himself that they were fast asleep.

Slowly he crept to the side of the two white ruffians, and producing a lariat from about his waist, he proceeded to bind both sleeping desperadoes and secure their weapons.

Having bound the outlaws, he proceeded to each snoring Indian and secured his rifle also.

Richard watched these proceedings like one in a dream. He could scarcely believe he was

awake. What was the meaning of the strange actions? Why should this drunken savage remove the weapons of his comrades? Why should he secure the two white ruffians?

All these questions flashed into Richard's brain as he watched the mysterious savage's strange behavior.

Having gathered the rifles and knives, the Indian disappeared into the thicket, and after an absence of about ten minutes he saw the shadowy form of the savage wade across the creek, leading the two horses which the outlaws had ridden into camp. Soon a faint splash in the water attracted his attention. The savage was returning. Nearer and nearer he approached until he was among the sleeping group about the fire. In his hand he clasped a formidable bowie knife. The Indian glanced toward the prisoner. Their eyes met. Richard felt that the supreme moment had arrived. He felt certain that the savage meant to murder him, and after robbing his comrades escape with the plunder. Nearer drew the Indian. His lips parted. He spoke.

"Whisht, Master Richard! Now's our chance to give them the slip."

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE QUICK-SANDS.

HAD a bolt from Heaven fallen at Richard's feet he could not have been more startled than he was as he recognized Dennis Flaherty as the painted savage who stood before him, knife in hand.

The truth now dawned upon him. The brave Irishman had followed close after the Indians, and had concealed himself in the thicket and awaited a favorable opportunity to attempt a rescue. He had overpowered the Indian that went in search of firewood, and transferring his savage trappings upon himself, had boldly entered the camp. Richard had seen the events that followed.

"Come now! don't be standing there like an amadhaun."

While speaking, Flaherty, with the keen knife, severed the thongs from the wrists of the prisoner and entirely freed him from the tree. "Now, don't let the grass grow under your feet. Yer surprised to see an Irish Injun, ain't you? This is a new tribe called the Tipperaries. Come now! Away wid you across the strame and you'll find two horses."

Further explanation was cut short by a wild yell, and instantly the reclining forms of the savages about the fire sprang to their feet. The effects of the liquor had passed off, and both savages and their two white comrades were filling the air with their shouts. One savage ran to all the others and hastily released them, and awakened the others, who in turn removed the lariats from the outlaw brothers.

In the meantime Richard had not been idle. At the first outburst he sprang away in the direction indicated by Flaherty and rapidly waded the creek. Instantly the outlaws and the savages were running hither and thither. The tallest of the ruffian brothers finding his weapons gone, darted toward Flaherty, with an oath upon his lips, but, ere he could seize him, the wily Irishman sent out his hammer-like fist, full into the face of the advancing ruffian, and that individual almost shot through the air, backward among his comrades, a senseless mass.

"Come on, ye murderin' spalpeens! One Irish Injun is enough for the likes of ye! Come on till the Tipperaries gives ye a fall!"

Dennis sent out another crushing blow that felled the nearest Indian to the earth like a stricken ox.

Then, with a wild "hurroo!" he leaped backward into the dense thicket and made his way rapidly to the spot where he had concealed the weapons, and hastily gathered them. He continued in his flight toward the creek and when in the center of the stream, he retained two rifles and flung the remainder into the water. The howling pack had just reached the edge of the creek and several sprang into the water after the escaping Irishman. As the foremost splashed into the creek, a spiteful crack rung out from the rifle in the Irishman's hand; a thin white puff of smoke curled from its muzzle and a death-yell followed, as the savage form fell headlong into the water.

For a moment the remaining pursuers seemed disconcerted. Flaherty did not pause to note the effect of his random shot, but dashed away toward the shore, which he reached by the time his pursuers had recovered from the momentary consternation. Again they dashed forward. Crack! crack! Several leaden messengers flew past the Irishman's head. He had overlooked a revolver in the belt of the eldest outlaw, and that person was making good use of the only firearm in the party.

A short run brought him to a glade and in the uncertain light of the early dawn Dennis saw Maxwell awaiting him. A wild Irish hurroo broke from Flaherty's lips and leaping several yards at a time he was soon beside the horse and vaulted into the saddle. He turned around and kissed his hand to the advancing pursuers.

"Take that, and divide it among ye! Give my love to the spalpeens that I cracked over the

jaw," he cried, and then giving the steed free rein, away bounded the two horsemen as a cry of dismay arose from the two brothers and their Indian allies, as they saw their captive and his rescuer glide away in the dim light of the coming day.

The sound of pursuit grew fainter as both men left the yelling crew in the distance. The country was like the entire region of the Black Hills, volcanic and rugged. Only here and there an open glade or roadway, streams of water and small lakes cutting up the places that nature had left free from towering boulders and crags.

After an hour's ride, our friends finally struck a hard road and reined in their foaming steeds to observe the locality. Scarcely had they done so when from behind a huge boulder came the "click! click!" of a fire-arm and a voice shouted:

"Hold your hands up, both of you, or we'll riddle you!"

Two men stepped forth from their place of concealment and leveled revolvers at Flaherty and Maxwell. This had been done so rapidly that our friends were completely taken by surprise, and at the mercy of the two road-agents that glared at them through the black cloth masks that covered their features.

"Come, hand over valuables!" said the foremost. "And you, Injun, search your garments for something of value, or I'll send an ounce of lead into your red hide."

"Begorra! you'll find no red hide about me; I'm a Tipperary Injun, and all I have of value about me is a couple of goold sovereigns in me inside pocket," said Dennis.

"Hello!" exclaimed the road-agent; "an Irishman painted up as an Injun! Well, Pat—"

"My name's not Pat! I'm Dennis Flaherty, and I'm not ashamed of the name. The Flaherty family are the ould royal descendants of O'Neil the great—"

"Never mind your ancestors."

"No—nor my aunt's brothers, either," retorted Flaherty.

"Come! hand out the 'goold' sovereigns that you have concealed about you," impatiently exclaimed the road-agent.

Flaherty placed his hand within his breast, as if to search for the gold pieces beneath his garments, and, quick as a flash, he drew forth—not the coveted money, but a polished revolver that cracked spitefully, and sent a bullet through the head of the nearest highwayman, who dropped to the earth, and his comrade in crime leaped behind the projecting boulder, and from this place of safety he fired at the Irishman. The bullet severed the feathers upon the savage head-dress that Flaherty still wore. Without waiting to see the effect of his shot, the road-agent disappeared among the rocks.

"Come back and get the goold!" shouted Flaherty. "Begorra, he's in a hurry to get away. The one that's lying in the road there won't get up in a jiffy. Sure he has a headache that he won't get over to-day. I feel so good over the victory that I could get as full as a b'iled owl."

"Don't crow till we're out of the woods," replied Richard, and as if to verify that old saying, he held up his hand warningly as a shrill whistle pierced the early morning air and echoed from crag to crag. The signal was repeated, and Flaherty gave vent to a long, but low whistle himself.

"That manes trouble. There's more of 'em close at hand, and the best thing we kin do is what Paddy Riley did."

"What's that?"

"Run, and make the enemy run after ye."

"One thing is certain," said Richard; "we can't intimidate these reinforcements, for they are doubtless well armed, and can shoot us down from behind the boulders without exposing themselves. My plan is for us to separate should we be pursued, and make for the wagon-trail. Once we reach it we may fall in with the trains and baffle the outlaws. While we remain in the hills we may be sure that Wide-Awake's cut-throats will be up on all sides, and eventually capture us."

"Very well," said Dennis. "You strike out one way and I the other, and we'll lead them astray like a couple of Jack-o'-lanterns."

The whip-like crack of a revolver sounded unpleasantly near, and forms appeared upon the rugged sides of the nearest crag.

Instantly our friends gave rein to the horses, and a race for life began. The horses, accustomed to the wild country, easily leaped the chasms that arose before them and flew over the boulders like wild goats. But the ruffians in pursuit were being slowly distanced as they scattered about and took short cuts to intercept the two horsemen. A quarter of a mile further brought them to a belt of stunted cottonwood trees, and upon the shore of a small lake.

"Now's the time to separate!" shouted Richard. "Let us try to meet on the trail crossing French creek. Good-by."

"Saints preserve you!" shouted Flaherty. "Good-by till I see you again at French Creek. You'll meet Dinny Flaherty there, or you'll see his ghost."

They separated, Richard dashing away along

the lakeside to the south and disappearing among the grove of trees, and Flaherty riding to the north-west, whipping the horse with the flat blade of his knife. So unexpected had been the movement, that a faint yell from the pursuers told the fugitives that their maneuver had excited great displeasure.

The greater part of the bandits followed in the direction taken by the Irishman. The rest followed like fiends after Richard. Mile after mile flew beneath the hoofs of his horse, and once he reined the panting beast to listen. Not a sound reached his ears. He was alone in the wilderness of cottonwoods that, like an oasis in the desert, grew in the wildest part of these regions.

He again started forward, and, after an hour's riding, came upon the banks of a wide but shallow stream. Beyond that, a small sandy plain met his gaze. Unconsciously he urged the beast forward, and the animal sunk almost to the knees in the soft yielding soil composing the bed of the stream; but the beast struggled onward until he reached the very center of the stream, and there he halted from sheer exhaustion unable to move a limb and snorting with fear.

For the first time Richard glanced about to discover the cause of the animal's alarm, and his eyes fairly started from their sockets as he made the terrible discovery that the horse was sinking into the bed of the stream. Already the waters had reached the body of the horse, and his limbs were firmly imprisoned in the soft soil. A cry of horror escaped the lips of his rider. *Both horse and rider were in the midst of a treacherous quicksand and rapidly sinking!*

The poor beast made vain attempts to extricate the limbs held firm by the sand, but each effort sunk them deeper and deeper. The water now reached to the neck of the steed, and the feet of the rider were fast becoming imbedded in the gathering sand. Richard made a sudden effort, and, dislodging his feet from the soil, climbed upon the saddle. The snorting of the horse continued, as the poor animal, with distended eyes, felt instinctively that his doom was sealed.

To cry for aid would bring his merciless pursuers again upon him, and to remain in the middle of the stream was certain death.

Naught appeared above the water and sand but the neck and head of the doomed animal. If Richard remained much longer he must also perish. Instantly he had resolved upon action. It was to leap toward the shore and then make a supreme effort to reach it. He sprang out as far as possible, and landed in the soft, yielding bed of the creek only to sink up to his body, and to his horror felt it an utter impossibility to move or extricate his limbs. Gradually he sunk deeper. A neigh of agony caused him to look back toward the horse, and he saw the waters closing above its head as it disappeared from view into the depths of the quicksands.

"Such must be my fate," thought Richard, and he offered up a prayer to that Being who watches and notes even the fall of a sparrow. The waters were almost under his arm-pits, and, as if to mock his misery, several huge buzzards flapped their way across the creek and then hovered above him.

"Send me help! Heaven aid me! Do not desert me in my hour of need. God help me! Must I perish?"

Hark! what was that! The bark of a dog! A huge black dog was rapidly nearing. "It's Dixie," murmured Richard. "Heaven be praised! I will not die alone."

CHAPTER XIX.

"RICHARD FINDS A NEW FRIEND."

WITH joyful barks the dog bounded down to the edge of the creek, and there paused. The brute seemed to scent danger, for he uttered a mournful howl as he saw his master in the center of the stream, with the waters gradually closing about him. He ran to and fro upon the shore and once he dashed into the water, but as he felt himself sinking into the sand, he rapidly retreated to the shore.

Suddenly he paused and dashed into the woods that loomed up a dozen yards from the banks of the stream.

Rapidly the waters and sand were closing about the youth, and while speaking words of encouragement to the dumb brute he could see that Dixie was tugging and making frantic endeavors to drag an object toward the stream. Nobly did the sagacious dog stick to the task, and with tears in his eyes Richard saw the brute's purpose.

The dog was making frantic endeavors to drag a long stout tree—a young tree that had been blown down and now lay prostrate among its fellows. The roots resisted for awhile, but Dixie's great strength finally drew forth the few stout fibers that remained in the soil, and he began dragging the tree by its short branches down into the stream.

"Hurry, Dixie, hurry!" shouted Richard, and as if the dog could understand the words of despair uttered by his master, he made another desperate effort and drew the tree into the water. Of course the brute sunk into the sand, but, seizing the branches of the tree, he drew

himself forth from the waters and again plunged onward. The tree now floated, and every effort brought it nearer to Richard until, in his despair, the youth reached out his arms and grasped the nearest branches!

Dixie had ensconced himself in the stout branches, and evinced his joy by licking the hands that clung to the tree with the despair of a doomed man. Now that he grasped the tree, Richard felt that there was still a chance of escape. The floating mass would bear his weight, and if he could but release one limb, he could free the other also.

Not a moment was to be lost. His arms were yet free to work, but he would soon be deprived of them if he delayed any longer. Seizing the tree nearer its base he made a supreme effort to draw his right foot from the quicksand. The tree remained motionless and the sand yielded—slowly at first, and Richard uttered a cry of joy as another effort displaced the sand and allowed him to almost withdraw the imprisoned limb. He found that by moving about he could dislodge the particles that surrounded him, and when that had been accomplished, he could draw himself out of the yielding sand.

He made one mighty effort, and grasping the tree still firmer, drew himself entirely out, and clinging to the floating tree pushed it toward the shore quickly, and as fast as one foot sunk into the bed of the stream he withdrew it by pushing the floating mass before him and clinging to it.

Dixie seemed to understand that his master was almost out of danger, for the noble brute fairly leaped along the trunk of the floating tree, manifesting his joy by barking and licking the hands of his grateful master.

In a very short time the mass grated upon the opposite shore, and the dog sprang out upon the solid embankment forming that portion of the water's edge.

Richard crept among the branches and then along the trunk until he sprang upon the shore, and again trod the solid earth. Then, did Dixie spring upon him, and by various antics show his joy, while Richard grasped the animal in his arms and lavished caresses upon his dumb preserver.

The danger was not yet past, for at any time his pursuers might again find his trail. Casting a look upon the treacherous stream that had almost engulfed him, Richard darted into the woods and Dixie followed quickly after him.

By aid of a pocket-compass he was enabled, by making a wide *detour*, to again journey in the direction of French creek. He saw or heard no more of his pursuers that day, and the sun was just disappearing beyond the range of hills when he emerged upon a plain shut in by several ranges of rugged hills. To his great joy he discovered a wagon-train in the distance, and he made his way toward it as rapidly as the ground would admit.

The convoy was just preparing to encamp for the night, as several fires twinkled upon the earth long before Richard had traversed half-way. Darkness had fallen upon the wild landscape as he drew near, and the groups about the fire started to their feet to gaze at the youth and his dumb companion as they came into the camp.

"Hello! who are you?" said a gruff voice. "You ain't one o' Wide-Awake's pets, are you? Strange district for you to be out promenading in!"

The speaker came forward to greet the young man. He was a fine type of the Western scout, Indian fighter and trapper. He was clad in the true Western habiliments of buck-skin, and as he stood leaning upon his rifle and gazing, inquiringly, or rather half doubtfully, at the youth, he presented a striking picture.

This person was in charge of the wagon-train to guide and protect the caravan. His comrades sat about the fire and as Wide-Awake's name was mentioned they arose and joined the old scout.

It was evident that these hardy scouts had frequently encountered the "pirates of the hills."

"Excuse me, gentlemen, for intruding," said Richard, "but after a series of adventures, such as seldom happens to man, I have escaped from the outlaw band that you speak of, and I assure you that it is the most powerful and desperate league of modern times, and their leader is the most crafty and subtle villain that ever directed the operations of a lawless banditti."

"It's funny the 'lynch' boys can't lay their claws upon him," said the old scout. "The rascal seems to bear a charmed life. I've shot at him several times myself and I think it's very strange that the vigilantes don't do something. 'Pears to me they're very slack—very slack!"

"I can explain that, gentlemen," said Richard, and before he could proceed, a tall, black-whiskered person joined the group, in time to overhear the last remark.

"Young man, I understand that you have just escaped from the outlaws that infest these hills. If you have no objections, I would like to hear your story. But first, let us have supper. Come, Zeke," said the person, addressing the old guide, "we'll hear the young man's story after our meal."

"All right, captain," replied the old frontiersman, and the entire group gathered about the fire, where a haunch of venison was sputtering over the flames.

Richard sat next to the black-whiskered person, and while the scouts were busy attending to the venison, the stranger began interrogating the youth, and finally said to him:

"So, you say that your name is Richard Maxwell. Mine is Ben Stevens. I am Deputy United States Marshal for this Territory, and also in the employ of Allen Pinkerton's Detective Bureau, of Chicago. Mine is a sad story and can be told in a few words: Several years ago myself and younger brother resided in Chicago, and there we formed the acquaintance of a villain, John Adderson by name. He led my younger brother on, step by step, to the gambling table, and robbed him at every chance. One night my poor brother discovered the scoundrel cheating at cards and accused him of it. The cowardly villain plunged a knife into my unfortunate brother's heart, killing him instantly, and then fled. I have searched far and near for him. Sometimes I have been quite close to him, and again at times entirely off the scent, but a still, small voice bids me hope, and wait, and that my brother's murderer and I will yet meet face to face. I have tracked him to these hills, and I believe that at last I am upon the right trail."

When Stevens concluded his story, Richard gave him a minute description of the outlaw chief, Wide-Awake, and a full account of his capture and escape from the road-agents' lair. Stevens's face expressed surprise when Maxwell informed him of the double character Wide-Awake was assuming, and the detective brought his hand down firmly upon his narrator's shoulder, as he exclaimed:

"It is plain to me now! That's the very reason why this notorious outlaw has baffled every effort of the vigilantes. The rascal being the head and front of both organizations, managed both to suit his own purposes. But his race is run."

The old scout had joined the two men during the foregoing conversation, and gave vent to a low whistle of surprise at the discovery.

"Well! I swear to gum!" said he; "it's funny that never came into my thick skull. But, Stevens, let me suggest something. It won't do to alarm the villain! He might get away if he found that his secret was known."

"That's just what I was about to remark. We must move cautiously. I mean to bag the whole lot if I can. I am not only doing this for the cause of justice and order, but I have a deeper motive. A murdered brother's blood cries aloud for vengeance, and the oath I took over the inanimate clay must be fulfilled!"

"As for myself," said Richard, "I dare not return to Custer City while that scoundrel rules under his assumed name of Judge Brooks, for his safety demands my life, and he has aroused the 'committee' against me, and they would finish the work they began if I give them another opportunity."

"I mean to arrange that. You need have no fear; you can trust me, and you can trust old Zeke Bradford and his men also. They owe Wide-Awake and his gang a debt that will soon be canceled. I propose to do this: I want you to return to Custer City with me in disguise. We will watch our chances, and when all is ready, spring the trap and catch our man. I will have assistance and proof to arouse the miners against this wily rascal and show them how they have been duped and blinded by this daring desperado. You will stain your features and exchange your garments for a Mexican costume, and carry out the idea that you are one of the Mexican teamsters. In that disguise you will be safe, and when the proper time arrives you can again appear as Richard Maxwell! What do you say?"

Richard longed to return to the town so he could ascertain the whereabouts of the lovely girl he loved so devotedly. Each moment her beautiful face haunted him, and upon those sweet features he saw the shadow of grief, and the large blue eyes seemed forever appealing to him to save her from the fiend that persecuted her. The young man was in a world of agony as he thought of Nellie Gordon being helpless in the power of the man who had sworn to possess her. No wonder he eagerly grasped the idea suggested by the detective. It was his only chance—his only hope. Disguised as the detective proposed he should be, he could with safety enter the town and thus prosecute his search for Nellie, and at the same time be instrumental in aiding Stevens to bring the scoundrel Wide-Awake to justice.

Zeke Bradford produced a full suit of Mexican clothing and Richard was soon attired, and his features stained to a swarthy hue. A heavy beard dextrously concealed his identity beyond the detective's most sanguine expectations. Richard was soon installed among the teamsters, and, aided by his slight knowledge of the Spanish language, the young man excited no suspicions, even among the number of greasers that formed part of the teamsters and followers of the wagon-train.

Long before the sun had fairly risen the con-

voy was in motion, *en route* for Custer City. Richard was again to enter the town from whence he had fled from the howling mob that cried for his blood—again to enter upon the scenes that had been fraught with so much misery, and that had almost blasted two young lives. He was not returning as Richard Maxwell, for that name and person must be, for the present, dead to the world!

CHAPTER XX.

THE IDIOT'S UNDERGROUND RETREAT.

THE piercing shriek uttered by Nellie Gordon as she saw the gleaming blade raised above her, and the features of the savage distorted by anger, reached other ears besides Glory's. Before the knife could descend upon its intended victim, the Idiot sprang from the couch of robes and leaped upon the Indian. The next moment the knife was seized from his hand, and the weapon hurled upon the hard, flinty floor of the cavern.

The savage turned with an angry exclamation, but, as his eyes rested upon the Idiot's face, he became passive as a child, and his eyes sought the floor as if to avoid the angry glances of the madman.

"What do you mean by attempting to kill those whom I seek to save from the human wolf? Are you, too, about to be a tiger, and destroy what I have sought to preserve?"

The Idiot's voice was one of reproach more than of anger, and the savage whom he addressed came slowly forward to him.

"Red Snake thought his friend had been deceived! Injun thought Crazy-head was about to die, and that the pale-faced girl and the black-face were the cause; and Red Snake was about to avenge his friend!"

"Harm not the dove that has flown to me for protection," said the Idiot, as he waved his hand to the Indian; and then turning to Nellie he gently took her hand, and, in a low, tremulous voice, continued:

"Do not be angry with Red Snake; he is so attached to me that I fear he would dye his hands in the blood of any one that he fancied did me harm. I saved him from the horrors of starvation when he lay wounded in the cañon—saved him from the wild beasts that prowled about him to complete the work that his enemies had failed to accomplish. Red Snake is noble. His friends are my friends, and my friends are his, also!"

As the Idiot concluded, the look of momentary intelligence that had rested upon his face suddenly departed, and the vacant stare of the maniac resumed its place upon those emaciated features. The air about him seemed peopled with phantoms. His eyes followed imaginary forms as they glided through vacancy, and, with outstretched arms, he slowly followed them. Reaching his couch of furs he laid upon them, and was soon apparently at rest.

Red Snake brought an armful of buffalo-robes, and arranged them near the fire for Nellie to rest herself upon them. The actions of the savage were now entirely changed: he seemed intent only upon showing every attention to the fair girl whom, a short time before, he was about to slay, believing her to be the cause of his benefactor's anger and wild ravings.

Nellie sat down upon the robes and gazed abstractedly into the fire, and the wild, exciting scenes of the past week arose before her. She saw the bleeding form of her father lying upon the floor of the rough hotel where the murder had taken place; she heard the shouts of the mob as they clamored for the blood of Richard Maxwell; she saw him led away by the howling mass, urged on in their work by the villain, Wide-Awake; she heard Richard's voice uttering a last farewell as he stood beneath the tree with the fatal noose about his neck. Nellie raised her hands to her eyes to shut out the dread scene, and sobbing as if her heart would break, she reclined upon the couch and shuddered as she heard the roar of the elements raging without.

She soon slept, and while the tear-drops glistened upon her cheeks, the rays of the fire caused them to sparkle like diamonds—diamonds of the purest water, bright with affection's glow, and glistening upon the beautiful face of the sleeper, who for a short time was oblivious to her sorrows.

Red Snake watched the reclining form upon the couch, and could scarcely take his eyes away from the beautiful vision.

Glory retired to a remote part of the cavern and removed the disguise he had assumed, and which up to the present time he had worn.

The negro sought a place near the fire, where he could observe the Indian, and laid himself upon the rocky floor.

Several hours passed, and yet the storm raged furiously without. Glory nodded, and after several attempts to keep awake, finally succumbed to the god of sleep, and was soon in the land of dreams. Red Snake was soon safely locked in the arms of Morpheus also, and silence reigned within the cavern.

The Idiot arose and gazed upon the slumbering forms, and finally glided to the fire and took from it a firebrand. He strode to the darkest corner of the cavern, and pressing against a

jagged rock, it swung around, seemingly upon a pivot, and disclosed a narrow opening through which the Idiot passed, and entered a small rocky chamber. Then he glanced upward and started back with a low cry of surprise as he beheld an opening in the vault-like roof of the cavern. Hastily he sprang upon the huge rocks forming a natural stairway to the roof, and seizing the mass of wood that hung downward, swung it back into its place over the opening, thus closing and concealing it. This trap-like contrivance was built of timbers and moved easily into its place as the Idiot swung it backward.

"Who has left that open?" said he, descending the rocky stairway. "Ah! yes! yes! I forgot about him," he murmured, as he came forward toward a form reclining upon a bed of leaves and peltries. He raised the firebrand, and bent over the slumbering man at his feet. "He has been out in the storm! 'Twas he who opened the trap in his wild delirium, but he has returned to the cavern. His garments are damp. The fever has fled. He is saved!"

The light of the brand cast its rays upon the white hair of the sleeper. The hair was matted and damp, and the face was turned away from the weird figure that hovered near, and stood silently regarding the sleeper.

Suddenly, the strange creature knelt down, and gently placing his hand upon the slumbering man, awoke him. The person turned his face, and the light fell upon the pale features of Warren Gordon!

For an instant Gordon stared at the wild figure at his side, and while surprise was plainly written upon his wan countenance, he feebly asked:

"Who are you?"

"I am the genius of the underground world. The monarch of the caverns and secret passages of the Black Hills. Having once been snatched from the very jaws of death I devote my life to cheating the fell destroyer of his victims. Wherever the grim monster lays his icy finger I always seek to snatch the victim from his merciless grasp. Many, ay, many have I stolen from him. Oft, when fiends in the shape of man have acted as the agents of the monster Death, I have baffled them—I have robbed them of their prey, just as the good Samaritan robbed me from the clutches of the dark angel. Ha! ha! ha!"

As the Idiot concluded, his wild peal of laughter echoed through the cavern, causing Gordon to shudder and shrink further away from the demented creature. The Idiot ceased his laughter and for an instant seemed to be lost in reverie, then fixing his eyes upon Gordon, said:

"You are saved! When you lay apparently dead upon the floor, and deserted by every one, I stole into the room through the window and snatched you from the angel of death that sought to claim you. I bore you here—here—here!" and the Idiot almost shrieked the word. "I defy him, he cannot enter here!"

"Tell me, strange person, why do you inhabit these caverns? Why not dwell among your fellow men?" said Gordon.

The Idiot started back and almost hissed the reply:

"Because I hate them! It is but a battle of life. The strong destroys the weak. Brother destroys brother. When kindred will raise their hand to destroy kindred, then it is time to flee from the world and find one where such things cannot be. Once, like yourself, I did inhabit the world. But it was long ere this flowing beard had grown; long ere this snow-white hair fell about my shoulders! long ere I wore these garments once the covering of wild beasts. Money! money! the curse of mankind, drove me from the world! Man, look not upon money as the only thing needed for happiness. I tell you it is cursed! cursed! and the arch fiend tempts man to barter his soul for it—to dye his hands in the blood of his fellow man to possess it. I tell you, man! my brother slew me for the wealth I possessed—mercilessly slew me. You do not behold in me a man; I am but a spirit, a phantom commissioned to rove about and grasp the victim of death and save him—save him—as I was saved myself!"

The lunatic fell upon his knees, and for the next few minutes a deadly silence reigned. Gordon shuddered and his heart smote him. The words of the Idiot recalled his own crime. "Brother destroying brother" was a shaft that struck him in the very heart that now reproached him.

He would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to obliterate that crime, and even now the sobbing of the weird creature caused the tears of repentance to fall upon his pale features.

Gordon's wound still pained him, and the loss of blood had rendered him feeble, and it was with an effort of pain that he crept toward the Idiot, and gently laid his hand upon the kneeling figure.

"Don't weep," he said, and his voice trembled with emotion.

The Idiot glanced into his face and uttered a gasp, and seemed to shrink from Gordon's touch.

"Tell me, strange being, what was your name when you dwelt among your fellow-men in the

world that you now shun?" said Gordon, as he leaned forward to catch the Idiot's reply.

"My name was—" but before he could finish the sentence a thrilling scream was borne to their ears from the inner cavern. Faint though the scream seemed, the Idiot heard it and leaped to his feet with a startled look. He flung aside the firebrand.

"The wolves! the wolves!" he cried. "The lamb is in danger, but the shepherd is near."

Then he darted away in the dark, and before Gordon had realized his absence, he had disappeared through the rocky wall, and a dull thud told that the secret passage was closed.

It was in vain that Gordon sought to open the trap in the roof or to discover the secret opening through which the Idiot had made his exit. Faint and exhausted he fell upon his bed of leaves and heard the confused sounds of many voices and an explosion of firearms; then all was a blank.

When the Idiot sprang through the secret passage another scream reached his ears as he leaped into the cavern, and he uttered a wild cry that echoed again and again. Grouped in the furthest corner of the cavern were Red Snake and Glory. Close to them was Nellie Gordon. In the narrow passage leading down into the cavern, were the evil faces of armed men, and foremost among them was the outlaw captain rapidly advancing.

"This way! this way!" he hoarsely shouted, and seizing Nellie he bore her away as if she had been a mere child. Away he dashed into the dark aisles of the cavern, the Indian and negro close behind him. A yell of rage broke from the desperadoes and the entire group started in hot pursuit. Two rifles cracked in quick succession.

"Stop! fools!" cried the bandit. "You'll kill the girl. Take them alive; they can't escape us."

The Idiot suddenly paused. Before him yawned a black abyss and a deep gloom beyond it. It was but for an instant that he halted; the next moment he was crossing the frightful chasm upon a long log thrown across the awful gulf. The moment he reached the opposite side of the chasm, Glory and the Indian darted over also, and Red Snake seized the end of the log and hurled it over into the fathomless crevice. Not a moment too soon, for two of the foremost pursuers were already upon it and a horrible cry of despair arose from the poor wretches as they fell headlong into the abyss, clutching at the murky darkness in their desperation.

The remainder of the outlaws paused upon the very edge of the pit and the next moment a volley of fire-arms rung through the rocky arches of the cavern, and the bandits paused to see its effects.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OUTLAW FINDS THE IDIOT'S CAVE.

It will be remembered that the road-agent dashed away from the vicinity of the cavern after witnessing the phantom, as he supposed, of Warren Gordon.

Wide-Awake continued his hurried flight, breathless and terror-stricken; and he had gone probably a half-mile when two forms issued from the dense undergrowth lining the side of a cañon. The two forms leaped out into a spot where the faint moonlight struggled to dispel the gloom, and in this dim light Wide-Awake saw the gleam of polished steel, and started back as a voice broke the quiet night air with its gruff summons:

"Halt!" cried the foremost figure.

Wide-Awake instinctively carried his hand to his belt, but no weapon greeted his touch, and he stood calmly awaiting the sequel to the command uttered by the figures.

"Down with your pistol, pard!" was the next exclamation that greeted his ears. "It's dog eat dog! Don't you see it's the captain? We're a pair of near-sighted idiots. It's all right, captain; we were out on a private excursion, and thought we'd got fresh game. Beg pardon for the sudden scare, captain." And as the voice concluded, both men stepped forward to disclose their features to the astonished outlaw.

Wide-Awake uttered an exclamation of mingled joy and surprise as he saw the features of the Ripley brothers, Zeb and Hank—two of the most dangerous and reckless members of the league. These were the same worthies that Flaherty had baffled when Maxwell was a captive in the Indian camp.

The outlaw captain grasped the hands of his two followers, and once more his courage returned, and he felt bold enough to face an army of ghosts or goblins.

"Hank," said he. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts!" replied the eldest brother, contemptuously. "I'd like to see the ghost that could scare me. I've heard of such things, but never run across one."

"If you had proof, that is to say, if you beheld one with your own eyes, you'd believe in such things, wouldn't you?" said the road-agent.

"Well, I don't believe all that I see. I might see strange things, Cap! but we always inves-

tigate, don't we, Zeb?" And Hank turned to his brother.

Zeb gave a slight laugh and merely said: "Well, I should remark!"

"Now, let me tell you, boys," said Wide-Awake. "I saw Warren Gordon's ghost just as plain as I see you both now, and I wasn't dreaming, or the victim of imagination, either."

"Well, cap'n, you might have seen something that looked like him, but it will bear investigation, won't it, Zeb?" said Hank Ripley.

"I should remark!" replied that worthy.

"You remember, we all saw Warren Gordon's body lifeless at our feet, don't you?" said the outlaw captain.

"Yes, but don't you remember, Cap, that the body turned up missing?" You say that you were not dreaming, and you say that it wasn't imagination. My opinion is, that you didn't see any ghost, but you saw the live body of this 'ere Gordon. I always did think there was a screw loose somewhere, didn't you, Zeb?"

"I should remark!" came from the lips of Zeb Ripley, and that answer seemed to clinch Hank's opinion at all times.

"My opinion is, Cap, that we investigate the matter. First let me tell you of a little adventure we've had since I last saw you," and Hank Ripley, helping himself to a large mouthful of tobacco, proceeded: "We came upon the track of that young feller that had given us the slip at the hanging festival. The reds had him in charge, and I knew that you'd pay most any sum to get your hands upon him, so we set to work to get him from the reds. In some manner we were both drugged by the copper-colored rascals, and when we came to, there was trouble in the camp. Somebody dressed exactly like an Injun was helping the prisoner to escape. Zeb and I rushed for him at once; when he let fly a fist that beats all creation for toughness, and one of us caught it full in the face, and one—of—us—dropped; didn't we, Zeb?"

"Well! I should remark!" said the younger brother, but this time his voice fairly hissed his favorite expression, probably as a recollection of Flaherty's ponderous fist, awakened his anger.

"Do you mean to tell me that some one crept among you and freed the prisoner?" said Wide-Awake.

"That's just what I mean to say, and, worst of all, the daring chap took all the guns and weapons and slung them into the creek. I peppered away at him with my shooting iron, but 'twas no use; they both got away just as slick as you please. We got onto their trail, but they got away in spite of that. We happened to be skirmishing on our own hook, down near the old road, when we heard shots down in the gulch, and we were making for it when you came dashing along, and we came near dropping you—didn't we, Zeb?" said the elder brother.

"I should remark," murmured Zeb.

Wide-Awake poured a torrent of abuse and maledictions upon the heads of the savages for allowing Maxwell to elude them, and his rage knew no bounds.

"You say that some one disguised as an Indian stole among you and helped Maxwell to escape?" said he.

"Yes, and it won't be healthy for him if Zeb or I ever lays eyes upon him," replied the elder Ripley.

"I know exactly who it was," said Wide-Awake. "It was that confounded Irishman, Flaherty, and the first chance that presents itself will see a rapid settlement between us. Now let me tell you, Hank, I see for myself that I have been the victim of trickery. Of course I don't believe in ghosts, and sure as I live there's a secret connected with that gulch. The Idiot has discovered secret passages, and uses them to advantage. I should not be surprised if Warren Gordon was to be found lurking in these underground tunnels—cared for by that mysterious being we call the Idiot. Strange what fear takes possession of me when I encounter that wild creature! But, I propose to investigate the locality and unearth Warren Gordon if he has found an asylum in those caverns."

"Correct! cap'n! The only way is to investigate! Eh! Zeb?"

"I should remark!" quietly replied Zeb.

"Then we shall return to Rodman's hut, get a number of the boys together and prepare for the trip. We will leave no stone unturned to discover an entrance into these mysterious passages. Once we find an entrance we will find the persons we are after. The Idiot has spirited away the girl and she must not escape me. Come! make all haste for Rodman's ranch and we will return instantly."

As Wide-Awake concluded, that worthy started off closely followed by the Ripley Brothers. A tramp of several miles brought the trio to a high range of hills from which elevation the ravines could be seen.

As they reached this elevation, the three men started back with an exclamation of surprise upon their lips. A red glare met their astonished gaze, and flames were plainly seen issuing from the gloomy depths of the ravine below.

"Rodman's ranch's on fire!" exclaimed the three outlaws almost in one breath. And instantly the trio dashed away in the direction of the burning huts. Shouts were borne to their ears at intervals, growing louder as the outlaws drew nearer to the scene of the conflagration. In a short time they reached the midst of an excited group, gathered about the blazing logs of the outlaw's "roost."

"What's the matter?" yelled the captain, as he dashed among his followers.

"Matter enough! The hut's gone! That cursed Chinese has done the work," said Rodman. "You flung him down through the trap, and the yellow imp played 'possum until we'd all gone to sleep, then the first thing we knew the flame and smoke was in every corner of the shanty."

"And the Chinaman—where's he?" excitedly asked Wide-Awake.

"Gone! He's lit out!"

Then indeed did the bandit leader allow his rage to find full vent upon everybody. He was bailed at every point where victory seemed assured, and he laid his misfortunes upon his followers.

But one hope was now left to them. That was to immediately set out for the Idiot's quarters in the gulch and endeavor to again secure Nellie Gordon and dispose of her friends to avoid further mischief on their part.

"Spare none—not one," said he; "strike at the root, this time. By destroying her friends, we leave her no hope of escape or interference. Each one of them that falls into our hands, dispatch him at once. No prisoners—recollect!"

The burning embers of the hut formed a strange background for the wild picture presented by the group of desperadoes.

A few words of explanation served to acquaint the bandits with the purpose in view, and the motley crew started for the mysterious gulch.

As the party neared the vicinity Wide-Awake's anger cooled down. His great expectations in a measure tended to calm his passion. The early streaks of daylight were struggling in the eastern sky as the party neared the Idiot's lurking-place, and the party separated in groups of two or three to search each bowlder or crevice for the passage into the tunnels. Wide-Awake sought the spot where he had witnessed the appearance of the Idiot, and then again searched where the girl had eluded him. The huge bloodhound lay cold and stark upon the rocks, and a shudder swept through the ban lit's frame as he saw the awful plunge that the Mexican took as he toppled from the pinnacle of the rocky pyramid close by. He could not nerve himself to look into the abyss, and he turned from the spot.

He had taken but one step toward the cliff when he cried aloud with joy. He had discovered a small footprint upon the soft soil that had accumulated upon the rocky surface. Instantly a shrill whistle warned his followers of this, and they flocked about him.

"Sh!" said he, "we're on the trail. See, here's a big rock, and I firmly believe that it swings on a pivot, like our own secret rock does. Now, to find the knob."

Wide-Awake searched every part of the rock, and as he bent down close to the earth he suddenly exclaimed:

"Eureka!"

And his cronies bent down also to see the discovery.

There it was, a round iron knob imbedded in a crevice.

Wide-Awake pressed hard upon it; the rock swung around and disclosed the opening sought for.

"Now be ready!" whispered the outlaw leader. "Don't be taken off of your guard for an instant. Follow me, lads, and remember, spare the girl, but death to all others."

The next moment the desperado had entered the narrow passage, and his companions followed close upon his heels. Each hand grasped a deadly-looking revolver ready for action, and each pair of eyes looked anxiously forward to penetrate the deep gloom of the tunnel.

The passage terminated abruptly, and before the group stood revealed the cavern. Nellie Gordon reclined upon the couch of furs and the Indian and negro lay close to the smoldering fire. Light as was the step of the desperado upon the edge of the passage, the Indian heard it and sprung to his feet, and uttered a yell of warning and surprise.

Wide-Awake leaped down into the cavern, and as Nellie opened her eyes she beheld the hated features of the man she dreaded.

Instantly her scream of terror resounded through the vault-like arches of the cave, and in a few moments, a wild, fantastic form seemed to leap out from the black wall of the cavern and clasped her in his arms.

It was the figure of the Idiot, and he sprung away with Nellie into the dim passage close by, from the spot he had but just issued from. The negro and the Indian followed closely after him.

We have seen how they passed safely over the gulf, and how two of Wide-Awake's reckless followers plunged headlong into the awful cre-

vice. Then followed the blinding flash of firearms and the deafening report. Wide-Awake paused to see the effect of the volley as the smoke cleared away.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE REVELATION.

THE leaden hail swept over the retreating group of fugitives, and as the smoke cleared away the outlaws saw the space on the opposite side of the chasm vacant.

The group had disappeared, and a yell of rage broke simultaneously from their lips, as they realized that their intended victims had, for the time, escaped them.

"Quick! out into the open air and we may yet capture them! They can't return this way. They are caged and in a trap, after all!" shouted Wide-Awake, and he dashed away, followed by his reckless associates, toward the passage by which they had found an entrance into the cave.

Into this entrance they hastened, and in a few moments they had reached the open air, and with weapons ready, each stood on the *qui vive* for the appearance of the fugitives.

Not long did the bandit captain stand thus awaiting the coming of his prey, for a form seemed to issue from the apex of the rocks, about forty yards from where the outlaw group stood. It was the figure of the Idiot, and as he came into full view he uttered a wild, demoniacal laugh that sent a chill through the reckless group.

As the wild figure stood upon the rocks, a flash followed by a quick report broke the still morning air, and a shriek escaped the lips of the strange creature. Wide-Awake had fired at him.

The Idiot extended both arms and fell backward from the rocks into the horrible abyss behind him, his shriek still ringing in the ears of those who stood grouped about the outlaw leader.

"He's out of the way, at last!" cried Wide-Awake. "No man can live after such a plunge, and the Mexican is avenged."

Wide-Awake did not go to the verge of the cliff to note the fall of the demented creature, but turning to his followers, he gave the signal to follow, and sprung toward the spot where the Idiot had made his appearance, and to his great delight he discovered an opening amid the jagged rocks.

The next moment, followed by his desperadoes, he was forcing his way into a narrow passage, while the scream of a female told him that Nellie had discovered his presence and was again fleeing from him.

When the Idiot fell from the ledge of rocks he grasped at the stunted bushes that grew close to the side of the cliff, but they offered no support, and he swept down—down, until he struck a ledge almost at the bottom of the gulch.

There he lay, bleeding and mangled, and his life ebbing swiftly from numerous gaping wounds, and the bullet-hole in his forehead bore evidence of the outlaw's unerring aim.

Hardly had the Idiot touched the rocky ledge when a bowlder was thrust aside, and the form of Warren Gordon issued from an aperture and knelt over the mangled, dying figure stretched out upon the rocks.

"The bullet has restored my senses," he gasped. "I remember all that was a blank to me. I know your features. Give me your hand."

Warren Gordon took the hand of the poor creature within his own, and hurriedly said:

"You have but a short time to live. Tell me your history. Who are you?"

"I am your brother!" gasped the being we have known as the Idiot. "I am Robert Gordon!"

"My brother! Am I awake or am I dreaming?" cried Warren Gordon, as he bent over still nearer to the dying man to gaze into the features that even now were fast paling, as the angel of death had set his seal upon the bleeding brow of the doomed man.

"Yes, your brother Robert, whom you thought dead. Your cruel hand dealt the blow that caused me to endure a living death, but I freely forgive you. In your hour of temptation the Evil One urged you to do a deed of murder, but your soul is at least free from that crime. When you cast me into the waters of the lake I revived and managed to escape, but with my brain clouded and a mind that was a blank to all things past. How I wandered out into these wild hills I cannot tell. I have lived here like a wild beast, dreaded by the Indians and feared by evil white men. The scoundrel who sent that bullet into my poor demented brain has conferred a blessing upon me unwittingly, for he has restored my memory—restored me in time to say I forgive you, brother—forgive you from my heart. Avenge me. Your daughter is within the cavern. Seek her; save her! 'Tis growing dark again. Good-by, and may—heaven—bless you—"

A low rattle in the dying man's throat proclaimed that the end had come, and the Idiot was no more.

Warren Gordon fell upon the prostrate figure

and wept tears of repentance, and, over the mangled body of his brother, he vowed to avenge him.

He drew the body into the narrow opening of the cavern, and closed the aperture.

Meanwhile, an exciting scene was transpiring in the largest cavern. Nellie had seen the evil countenance of the road-agent as he appeared in the passage, and, terror-stricken, she fled, with the outlaw in pursuit. He rapidly gained upon her, and, as she was in the very act of falling insensible to the rocky floor, the strong arms of the outlaw encircled her waist and received the fainting form. Even as he did so, the cold muzzle of a pistol was pressed close to his temple and Glory's voice exclaimed:

"Drop dat gal, or you'se a gone rascal! Quick!"

Wide-Awake was thrown entirely off his guard, and, while still retaining Nellie, he would have turned to signal his comrades, but Glory anticipated the outlaw's purpose.

"None of dat!" said the negro. "If you raise your voice above a whisper, I'll send the bullet fro' your head quicker dan you could say shoo. Drop dat gal!"

Before he could comply with the negro's request the dusky form of the savage glided to the spot, and the Indian quickly thrust a gag into Wide-Awake's mouth; and Glory took Nellie from him, still keeping the revolver close to the villain, to prevent his outcry from bringing the outlaw crew to the spot.

Quick as thought the savage passed a lariat about the scoundrel's waist, and ere he could realize the situation he was bound and gagged and laid prone upon the floor of the cavern, where the wall cast a deep shadow, and hid him from prying eyes.

Glory could hear the tramp of the desperadoes as they searched for the passage into which Wide-Awake had leaped in advance of his companions.

"No time to lose. Quick! lead de way, Injun," cried the negro, and clasping the girl in his arms, he hobbled after the retreating form of the Indian.

The moment they left the chamber by the upper passage the outlaws poured into it from the opposite side, and by the aid of tinder soon struck a light and ignited a pine stick. By this light they could examine the chamber, and discover the numerous passages that led from it in almost every direction. A cry of surprise echoed from them as they observed the bound figure upon the cavern's floor, and they eagerly rushed to the spot and cast the firebrand's glare above the reclining form.

All started back, and but one word fell from each man's lips:

"Captain!"

A dozen pairs of busy hands unbound the wretch, and removed the gag from between his teeth.

Instantly the desperado sprung to his feet, and his hoarse cry fell upon the ears of his listeners like the growl of a wounded beast.

"Why do you stand here? Follow after them!" he cried. "Do you want them to escape me? After them! after them!"

"Which way?" cried several.

True enough, there were so many passages that even the enraged villain saw how his followers were baffled without a clew to ascertain into which tunnel the fugitives had disappeared.

"I have a plan. Out into the open air, every one of you, and then block up every avenue of escape. They will be like rats in a trap, and we can take them at our pleasure. Come! lose no time; the game is still in our hands."

Wide-Awake rushed upward into the passage leading to the outer world, closely followed by his men. Once outside they lost no time in rolling huge bowlders before the narrow entrance, thus effectually sealing it up. He then sought for the entrance upon the cliff, and this in a like manner was soon blocked by heavy masses of rock, and the villain paused to contemplate his work. A smile of triumph played upon his lips as he saw how he had finally imprisoned his victims in their underground retreat, to surrender or starve.

While thus reviewing this work with a smile of satisfaction, one of the Ripley brothers drew near and taking Wide-Awake's hand led him several hundred feet from the verge of the cliff and there pointed out to the outlaw captain a wide fissure in the rocks. This proved to be still another entrance into the passages beneath their feet. Wide-Awake listened a few moments at the opening, but a deathlike stillness prevailed in the depths of the crevice. For a few moments he stood undecided, then, finally turning to Hank Ripley, he said:

"Hank! watch this entrance for a few moments; I am going to explore it. Listen, in case I signal for assistance."

Wide-Awake loosened his weapons in his belt and holding one in his hand ready for instant use, he slowly and cautiously descended into the opening and gradually disappeared in the gloom. The outlaw on guard at the entrance stood eagerly awaiting a signal and peered down into the dark opening at his feet.

Wide-Awake continued groping in the narrow

passage until he reached a wide chamber. Through crevices in the vault-shaped roof came faint streaks of daylight that partially dispelled the murky atmosphere. The villain had barely gone twenty feet into this chamber when he uttered a cry of terror and he felt his heart cease its throbbing. His eyes seemed to leap from their sockets and his limbs refused to bear his weight. His teeth chattered and his very blood froze in his veins as he beheld in the center of the floor where a faint ray of daylight cast a subdued glow, the ghostly, weird creature, *The Idiot of the Hills*!

Wide-Awake had seen the mysterious being plunge downward from the cliff into the horrible gulch below, and knew that no human being could live after such a fall. Yet he now beheld the Idiot standing before him—one hand extended out to him, the other pointing to the bleeding forehead, where the bullet-hole met Wide-Awake's terrified gaze.

The outlaw again gave vent to a cry of terror and staggered from the haunted chamber, back into the tunnel-like passage from whence he had just entered.

Blindly tottering and reeling forward he finally reached the end of the crevice and Hank Ripley bent forward and assisted the pale, terror-stricken man out of the fissure.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Ripley.

"I've seen the Idiot's ghost!" he faintly said. "This cursed spot is haunted!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FACE TO FACE.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the events narrated in the last chapter, and for the first time in years Wide-Awake had absented himself from Custer City for almost a week. And in that space of time events had transpired and a web had been woven that threatened to imprison the bold outlaw within its meshes.

As usual, he frequented all the haunts immediately upon his arrival in town, and gave various excuses for his prolonged absence in order to disarm inquisitive parties. If his absence had occasioned any remarks, he certainly saw no difference in the greetings that he received when his burly figure strode into the numerous drinking saloons and gambling dens. Each player would glance at him as he entered and exclaim, heartily: "How are you, judge?" Groups stood at the rough counter, imbibing the liquors, while the majority of the occupants were seated about the tables, staking money and gold-dust upon the cards that won or lost at intervals.

At one table sat a group familiar to our readers. It was old Zeke Bradford and several of his scouts. They appeared to be indulging in the game. At another table sat the detective and a dark-complexioned man wearing a sombrero and attired as a Mexican. It was Richard Maxwell.

Into this den Wide-Awake finally turned and appeared among the rough assemblage. As the "judge" and vigilance leader he was greeted upon all sides. Here and there among the players he saw members of the league, and a secret glance exchanged between the "fraternity" told more than volumes.

After words of recognition all around, Wide-Awake—for we must still call him by that title at all times—sat at a table and was soon joined by Rodman, who entered shortly afterward.

The players were busily watching the game, so that the two confederates could converse without attracting attention.

A pair of keen eyes saw every movement—the eagle eyes of the detective. In an instant his plan was formed. He pretended to be under the influence of liquor, and Richard seeing the drift did likewise.

They both pretended to drink liberally from the bottle before them and grew noisy and intoxicated. The detective found a chance to lean over toward Richard and hurriedly whisper:

"After a while, stagger over near them, and fall helplessly to the floor, near the wall, where you can hear every word, and lay perfectly still."

Then again both men drank, apparently from the bottle, amid much hilarity.

The detective, however, scarcely took his eyes away from the face that seemed to rivet his attention, but so changed were the features that he was seeking for that he was almost in doubt that he had found his man.

Maxwell watched for an opportunity to do as the detective wished him to, and while pretending to drink and engage in maudlin talk, kept his ears open for stray remarks he might overhear from the two outlaws at the neighboring table.

"Captain!" said Rodman, "there's been trouble brewing since you've been away. You know that being wounded, I did not go on the last expedition, but I did good work in being left behind. We're on the eve of being all nabbed!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there is some treachery in camp!" was the quiet reply.

"Well, souse there is—what of it? It can't

harm us. We'll dispose of the traitors in a summary manner."

"Yes, that's all right enough; we can put the traitors out of the way, but look there!"

Rodman pointed to the wall almost opposite, and the outlaw leader saw a large placard nailed upon it with the following staring him in the face:

"Five thousand dollars reward for the apprehension of the outlaw known as Wide-Awake. The above sum will be paid for him, dead or alive.—LYNCH."

Several times did Wide-Awake read it over, and then brought his clenched fist down upon the table with an oath, but a warning look from his comrade silenced him. He was upon the eve of uttering an angry exclamation when an intoxicated man staggered over, and tripping, fell headlong to the floor almost under the table, where Rodman and Wide-Awake were seated. He lay perfectly quiet, and the two outlaws were about to drag the intruder from the spot when his sleeping became apparent from a series of snores and gasps.

The detective lay half-way upon the table where first we introduced him to the reader, and to all observers he appeared asleep. But, a restless eye was fixed upon the two villains near by and occasionally upon Maxwell, who lay beneath their table.

"Let him alone," said Rodman. "The mountain whisky has fixed him. He's full as a tick. He can't move; he isn't in our way, and, as for hearing what we say, I'll bet he don't hear a word, and if he did he wouldn't care."

"What do you think of that placard, Rodman?" said Wide-Awake.

"Just what I told you before: it means treachery!"

"Who would dare issue such a notice? Certainly not the vigilance committee without first consulting me," said Wide-Awake.

"Now, listen to me. I have seen strange men about the town lately, and some of them engaged in whispered conversation with the members of your committee. All this was while you were away. My opinion is that you've fooled time away running after that girl in which we had no interest, and you've neglected 'business.' It's caused dissatisfaction among some of the boys, and your absence here has caused a great deal of talk. My opinion is, pardner, that, to a certain extent, you've lost your grip, and must make a bold stroke to regain it all around!"

"There has been grumbling, you say?"

"Yes, and lots of it. We've lost time and several of our best men by fooling around after such people as this Maxwell and the girl."

"I can't let the girl pass out of my hands after all this trouble. No! a thousand times, no!"

"Where is she now?"

"I've set a guard over the cave where she has sought refuge, and she cannot escape capture."

"Very well; let some one else attend to that part of the programme; we can't afford to spare you. We need you here all the time to counteract the influence brought against us. Now, you see the effects of your absence: That placard means war to the knife against us, and they've taken the matter into their own hands, and you're left out of the question. They have succeeded in bribing some of our men, and the whole thing is, that if you had been here, all this would never have come to this focus."

"Who has dared to do this?"

"All of them. I tell you, captain, you've lost your grip all around. Do something bold to regain it."

"I think it would be advisable to call a meeting of the league, in full regalia. Our yearly meeting is due, any way. We will call every member, and then discuss the entire affair. Meanwhile, I will set about to discover the agitators here in town, and, by some means, silence them. That reward means my capture and the extermination of the league," said the desperado.

"Correct, pardner, that's just what it means, and the five thousand dollars is a temptation to some one," replied Rodman.

"Do you think any one in the order has bargained for it?"

"I do, for a fact!" was the reply.

"Whom do you suspect?"

"It won't do for me to mention anybody, for I only suspect, and that's all."

"Very well! The traitors, who ever they be, will meet with their fate. Now then, to call the meeting. You know just exactly how many members we have left. Each shall enter the secret chamber, masked, and in the regalia, for it will be solemn business. The reason for each one to appear masked is that many of our 'league' are connected here in town, some in business and some are not. If there is treachery afoot it won't do for all members to know each and every individual belonging to the order. Do you see my object?" said Wide-Awake.

"I do, and you are right. Where shall the meeting take place? You know that my ranch is destroyed."

"We shall meet at the Mexican's shanty. There is an underground chamber there. Now

attend to this at once. You know every member; serve a notice upon each. Remember! tomorrow night, at eight, sharp!"

"All right, captain! What is the password?" said Rodman.

"The password will be 'gold-dust,'" replied Wide-Awake.

"All right! I'll see a great many to-night and make out the roll, omitting those we have lost by death!"

Rodman arose, and grasping Wide-Awake's hand, said:

"I hope we will recover our lost ground, captain, for I tell you we are in a shaky condition."

"Not quite as bad as that. 'Don't give up the ship' is a good motto, and stick to it, Rodman," said the outlaw.

"I'll stay to the very last. Good-night!" and the ruffian passed out from the den, leaving Wide-Awake seated at the table.

For a few moments he seemed buried in thought. The desperate man had never thought of treachery in his powerful league, and should one or more denounce him to the "lynch" committee, his race would be at an end. But then, if it came to the worst, thought he, I can escape and take enough treasure with me to bid defiance to want for the remainder of my days. The placard upon the wall troubled him. He had issued, similar ones himself, but then he knew they amounted to nothing. This one seemed to be written in letters of fire that danced ominously before his eyes, no matter which way he turned.

Come what may, he resolved not to relinquish Nellie Gordon, but if worst came to worst to take them by force and escape.

He knew that his vigilant men watching the cavern would not allow the inmates to elude them, for Wide-Awake had promised a large sum as a reward to the one capturing the fugitives, and especially Nellie Gordon.

Several days had elapsed and he had not yet received any encouraging news from that quarter.

One thing perplexed and worried him, and that was the mysterious appearance of the Idiot of the Hills after the horrible plunge into the abyss, and that too, with a bullet sent through his brain. That it was the spirit of the strange creature, Wide-Awake had but little doubt.

He fully believed that the gulch was haunted, and for that reason had hurriedly departed, leaving part of his men to watch for the appearance of those he wished to capture.

All these things came into the desperado's mind, as he sat gloomy and uneasily at the table. His eyes wandered about the room, and ever and anon they rested upon the glaring placard on the wall, little dreaming how his every movement was watched by the man sitting at the nearest table.

His reverie was broken by a hand laid upon his shoulder. Glancing up he observed one of his league who had quietly made his way over to him, and this person bending down whispered into Wide-Awake's ear:

"The fellow pretending to be drunk, over at that table, is merely bluffing; he's as sober as you or I, and he keeps his eyes on you continually."

The outlaw's hand sought for his weapon, and grasping it he turned to observe the man indicated by his follower. He felt instinctively that he was about to face a mortal foe, and, weapon in hand, he turned to observe the person. Their eyes met. One step and the outlaw was beside the sitting man, when the person alluded to electrified the desperado and caused the revolver to drop from his nerveless grasp to the floor, by hoarsely whispering:

"Down with that pistol! I know you, John Addison!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"BEARDING THE LION IN HIS DEN."

WIDE-AWAKE started back and suppressed the cry of surprise that welled up to his lips; the next instant he produced a long, keen bowie-knife, and raised it above the detective. But, before the heavy blade could descend, Maxwell leaped from beneath the table and grasped the villain's hand, and the next instant the bowie-knife flew from his grasp to the floor. As if by magic the lights were extinguished, and friend and foe were in the dark. The crack of many firearms resounded through the room, and a scene of confusion followed.

Wide-Awake, seizing upon this opportunity, forced his way to a window and leaped out. The name spoken by the detective had stricken such terror into his heart that his courage forsook him, and he sought relief in flight. Wide-Awake had not recognized the man. He simply looked upon him as one of the agitators, or probably a United States official sent to investigate the lawless acts of the road-agents. Had he known for a moment the identity of the detective, he would have continued his flight and never again ventured among the Black Hills. But he scarcely knew what to think, and ere he had gone a quarter of a mile the conflict was at an end, and lights restored, and perfect order reigned in the gambling den.

The scene enacted was of frequent occurrence,

and excited no surprise, and it was the custom upon the beginning of a fracas to put out the lights, and let disinterested parties get out in the best manner possible, aided by the darkness.

Maxwell and the detective did not betray their mission in any manner, and did not even breathe the name of Wide-Awake to any of the surrounding inquirers.

The scout and his hardy men were all on hand, and their defiant attitude and heavy firearms had kept the outlaw's adherents in check, and they now sat at the tables, meek as lambs, and apparently unconcerned about their leader, who was nowhere to be seen.

"Now," said Stevens to Maxwell, "I am satisfied that I have found my man. 'Tis he! and the hour of vengeance is at hand. Did you overhear anything of interest to our cause while you lay under the table?"

"Yes," replied Maxwell. "The entire league are to meet to-morrow night, masked!"

"Where? Did you ascertain?"

"Yes, I know the place."

"This is a rare chance to discover every member belonging to this infamous order. By capturing the leader we do not exactly break up the league, for he would not betray the members. We can now see the number, and know exactly who they are."

"That is the idea exactly!" said Maxwell. "As each member is to appear masked, my plan is to enter and thus become acquainted with the working of the league and its men. I know the password."

"Who will enter the place? You or I? Remember death is the penalty of discovery. You take your life in your very hands by entering that place."

"I have weighed the matter over carefully, and to-morrow night we shall decide who is to enter, you or I," said Richard.

"I have everything prepared to entrap the villain. By aid of the two Ripley brothers, I can bring the rascal to justice here, in this very town," said Stevens. "Are they to be trusted?"

"Trusted? No! But they do not receive the reward until they help to deliver the scoundrel to the new committee. They have all to win by aiding us, and lose by not doing so. The rascals will serve any one for cash. They regard oaths as mere nothings. We could not have selected two better men for the work before us."

The detective arose from the table, and, followed by Maxwell, he emerged from the den into the street. Shortly afterwards Zeke Bradford and his men left the place and proceeded to the log building where they were temporarily stopping. Here they were joined by Maxwell.

Stevens remained in consultation with several influential men of the town until quite late, and then wended his way to the log building where his friends were awaiting him. He had almost reached the building, when a person suddenly appeared before him and gruffly exclaimed: "Hello!"

"Is that you, Ripley?" said the detective, replacing his weapon.

"Yes," replied that worthy. "How is things getting along. Does me and brother Zeb still stand solid for the reward offered?"

"Yes, the moment the man we're after is handed over to us, you receive the amount and no one will question or bother you," said Stevens.

"We'll have to get the money quick and light out of these diggings a darned sight quicker, for it won't be healthy to remain around here many seconds after giving the gang away," said Ripley.

"You'll be provided for," said Stevens; "but when do you begin work?"

"Soon as possible. We have a meeting to-morrow night, and we can't do anything until that's over."

"Very well, then; let it be as soon as possible. Good-night," and Stevens left the traitor, and a few moments later he entered the building and related the circumstances to the group assembled. Ripley wended his way among the associates he was bargaining to denounce and betray.

Slowly the meshes were gathering about the desperate band that for years had defied law and "committees," and whose record was one long series of robberies, crime and bloodshed. The avenging Nemesis was at hand, and a few days more would see the destruction of the powerful league, and its members and leaders swept from the Black Hills forever.

Within the log building the detective and his supporters arranged matters, and each man was given his share of the work in co-operating with the "vigilantes." Stevens was about to extinguish the light when a bold rap at the door caused each man, weapon in hand, to stand ready for an emergency.

"Who's there?" asked the detective.

"It's me, begorra! Open the door! I've reinforcements from Ireland!" answered a voice in rich brogue, and as Stevens opened the heavy door Dennis Flaherty bounded into their midst and executed a few steps of a wild Irish jig.

"Where is he? Where is he? Some one o' yees tell me where is he!" he cried.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Master Richard Maxwell," replied Flaherty, glancing about the room.

"Here I am, my dear old friend. No wonder you didn't know him dressed in this manner," and Richard cordially grasped the Irishman's hand, and evinced his great pleasure at thus again meeting his preserver and friend, whom he had almost given up for lost. Richard explained the reason of his permanent disguise, and Dennis gave an account of his wanderings since parting with Richard on that eventful day when both were fleeing for life from the outlaw horsemen.

"And I have more news for ye, Master Richard—sad news, maybe, but I must tell ye. I came through the gulches about ten or fifteen miles from here, and I suddenly came onto a party that had three prisoners: one was an Injine, the other was your nigger, and the third was that lovely angel, Miss Nellie. There wasn't the least chance of a rescue, or you bet the Flaherty family would have done its duty! So I tracked them, and when I saw where they went to I made a bee-line here for to find you; and, by dumb luck, I got all the information I needed, and here I am. Now, say the word, and Dennis Flaherty, bold as a lion and with fists as powerful as the hind feet of a jackass, will lead the way, and, begorra! do all the fighting for purty Miss Nellie!"

"You know the exact spot where the outlaws entered?" said Richard.

"Faith I do, for I was in there once miself before I knew it; for the feet of me slipped, and away I went to the bottom and found miself in the caves. That's where I got the Chinees out of trouble," said Flaherty.

"I know the place," said Richard, "and, if I am not much mistaken, we'll find that the caverns have an opening into the underground chamber where the meeting is to take place to-morrow night. Oh! how I long to fly to her rescue! But it must not be until to-morrow night, for one false move will ruin all our well-laid plans."

Richard spent the night thinking of the girl again in Wide-Awake's power. He loved her so devotedly that her very name was sacred to him, and her beautiful face was forever uppermost in all things he beheld.

Morning dawned at last, and the little band waited the coming of night impatiently. Small knots of horsemen rode in and out of town, and, by nightfall, many had secretly and quietly left town for the vicinity of the Mexican's shanty, not a great distance from Custer City.

Stevens and Maxwell left the town about dusk, the detective having first called at the dwelling-place of several "vigilantes." It was after seven o'clock when the youth and Stevens reached the ravines, and, at a distance, they saw the ranch nestling among the sparse growth of trees. They both crouched among the boulders, for footsteps were rapidly nearing their place of concealment. Nearer drew the person approaching, and in the twilight Richard recognized the man whom the outlaw captain had once met at the windlass. This ruffian carried a small bundle under his arm, and, as he reached a spot almost opposite the two watchers in ambush, he halted as if waiting for some one to make an appearance. Not long was he kept in waiting, for another form loomed up in the dying light of day, and the two members of the league greeted each other. Both carried bundles.

"Hello, Tom! Got your regalia, eh?" asked the new-comer.

"Yes, the masquerade takes place to-night," replied the other. This gave the detective the needed information concerning the bundles that both carried.

"Tom Watson, it's my opinion that there is business of a delicate nature to be settled to-night," said the latest arrival, "for things have got so the lads are demoralized!"

"Yes, and I'm glad that the meeting's being called. I believe Wide-Awake is getting too soft for our business. He's love-sick and neglecting trade," said he addressed as Tom Watson.

"So he is, and he's got the girl now in the retreat. More trouble brewing, sure as you live. I'll leave you; I'm going down to warn Spanish Joe of the meeting; I've got about an hour to spare," and the road-agent stalked away in the direction of the town.

Watson was about to descend the ravine when Maxwell leaped from his place of concealment, and, by a well-directed blow of the butt-end of the heavy revolver, laid the ruffian insensible at his feet.

A few moments more and he was securely bound and gagged. Maxwell took the bundle and assisted the detective to conceal the senseless villain.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Stevens.

"Because I have decided to enter that den. I have the regalia in this bundle. All that I love and care for is now in that place and I must risk life itself to save her. You have the party all ready and upon a signal come to the rescue. You know that we were to decide who was to enter that den; so let it be I."

Dark fell the shadows. It would be several hours before the moon arose, and, taking advantage of the night, Richard strode away toward the ranch, and when near it, he opened the bundle and attired himself in a long black domino that was within it, and placing the mask upon his features, approached the door and knocked!

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

A VOICE within asked, in a muffled tone:

"Who comes here?"

"Gold Dust!" responded the applicant, and the door swung open and he entered. The person acting as tiler was attired similar to the spy. A long black domino, with a huge eye, signifying "Wide-Awake," painted upon the breast of the gown; a black mask concealing almost all the features, completed the outfit.

"Who is it?" asked the tiler.

"Tom Watson!" replied Maxwell.

"All right; descend!"

A trap opened in the floor, and a light issued therefrom. Maxwell descended, and almost drew back as he found himself among the strange assemblage that met his view. Around the rocky chamber were the masked figures, with the glaring eye upon their breasts, and seated upon a raised platform were two figures presiding over the meeting. A vacant place attracted Richard's attention, and he surmised it was Watson's; and in this he was correct.

As he seated himself, the figure upon the platform spoke:

"You are late, brother! but now, as we are all here, we will begin by calling the roll. We have lost some members by death, and there is now in the league, all told, counting myself, twenty-one. The secretary will call the roll."

It was Wide-Awake's voice that spoke, and immediately upon its conclusion, the man seated next to him began calling the roll, each member responding "Here" as his name was called. Finally the name of "Thomas Watson" was called, and Richard answered "Here!"

"This completes the roll," said the presiding officer; "and now to business. Our business has been quite profitable, as you are all aware, from the divisions of plunder during the year. We all remember the vows taken upon ourselves of secrecy and of brotherly feeling. We all know the fate of a member attempting or betraying the league. What is the penalty?"

"Death!" replied every voice.

"Right! What would you say were I to tell you we have traitors in our very midst to-night?"

Richard's heart sunk within him as the words fell upon his ears, but, thanks to the mask, it concealed the pale face beneath it. But the next words reassured him, and dispelled his fears.

"Yes, among us to-night, and members of the Wide-Awake league."

In a moment hands sought concealed weapons, but the leader's voice again arose:

"Stop!" said he; "the traitors are known and cannot escape. Hank Ripley and Zeb Ripley, step this way!"

The two brothers stepped forth from the circle and stood before the presiding figure, who again spoke:

"I accuse you both of bargaining to betray your comrades, and thus jeopardizing the life of every one connected with the league. I have ample proof, brothers, and you know that our safety demands instant action. What is the verdict?"

"Death!" shouted the assemblage, and before the brothers could offer any resistance, both were in the grasp of their fellow-ruffians, and securely bound.

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature—that is the motto of our order. Our safety demands the lives of the traitors. See that the wishes of the league are carried into effect instantly," and Wide-Awake motioned the culprits from his presence.

The two brothers were forced into an adjoining passage, and shortly after the muffled reports of two revolvers told that the traitors had paid the penalty of their treachery.

The executioners returned and sat among their comrades as if nothing had occurred. Richard had been a silent spectator of the exciting scene, but it would have been instant death to attempt anything in favor of the wretches.

"Now, my brothers," said Wide-Awake, "hereafter, I will devote myself to your interests. I have a lady imprisoned here who this night becomes my wife, and then the affairs of our band will go on as smoothly as ever. There are parties in Custer City whom we must remove at once, as our safety demands it, and once more we must reassert our rights and power in these Hills. I admit I have neglected business, but it shall not occur again."

A clapping of hands greeted the concluding remarks of their leader,

"Bring in the lady," said the chief.

Several left the circle, and as breathless silence ensued, Richard could almost hear the beating of his heart amid the deathlike silence that prevailed.

From a passage in the wall of the chamber

came the cowed figures, and after them the beautiful girl, who drew back shuddering, as she beheld the motionless, dark-robed figures standing around the dark chamber.

"In the presence of this league, Nellie Gordon, I claim you as my wife, and present them to you as my brothers, and you to them as my wife. Remember all that I have told you. This time I mean never to allow you to leave my presence until your final answer is spoken."

"My answer is still *no*! and to my dying moment will I utter the same reply."

Wide-Awake stepped down from the platform and took the little hand that was raised to motion him away.

"Resistance is useless," said he; "mine you must and shall be!"

A scream broke from her lips and Richard sought his weapon, but ere he could act a strange, weird form issued from the opening in the wall, and a ringing voice cried:

"Hold, villain!"

Wide-Awake turned, and as his eyes rested upon the strange being his knees smote together, and from beneath the mask came the exclamation:

"The Idiot's ghost!"

"I am no superhuman being," said the weird figure. "You have committed murder, however, and attempted that crime over and over again. The creature known as the Idiot is dead. I am but his counterpart."

"Who are you?" cried Wide-Awake.

"Your supposed victim! Look!" and he cast aside the flowing white hair and beard, and Warren Gordon stood revealed.

With a cry of joy, Nellie threw herself into her father's arms and rapturously embraced him.

Wide-Awake clung to the edge of the platform for support, and his followers stood motionless as statues, regarding the strange scene thus presented to their view.

"You sought to fasten the crime upon Richard Maxwell," said Gordon, "but your race is run, John Addison!"

Wide-Awake uttered a howl of rage, and grasping a bowie-knife from the desk was about to spring upon the old man, when the trap above opened, and the outlaw acting as sentinel shouted through the opening:

"There's treachery somewhere, captain. Here's Tom Watson, and I admitted some one claiming to be him."

Instantly the league was in confusion, and a score of pistols flashed into view. Wide-Awake turned to the circle and shouted:

"There's a spy among us. Everybody unmask!"

Before the order could be complied with a rattling volley of firearms echoed through the chamber, and the masked figures went down like wheat before the sickle. At least one-third fell beneath the withering fire of the "vigilantes," who now appeared from the dim passages right and left. A hand-to-hand conflict ensued. Glory and the Indian dealt blows right about, as those two characters appeared among the deliverers who had put in their appearance in the nick of time. Wide-Awake sprang toward Nellie, but before he could reach her side a well-directed blow from Richard's fist sent the ruffian reeling to the wall. Seeing that all was lost, he darted into a low tunnel at hand and left his comrades to shift for themselves.

Richard cast aside the gown and mask, and extending his arms to Nellie, he cried: "Look up, darling! You are safe! I am Richard Maxwell."

The next moment she was upon his breast, sobbing, and he held her in a loving embrace.

Flaherty and Stevens guarded the outside of the hut, and when the sound of fire-arms came from the underground chamber, the Irishman could resist no longer, but, striking down the outlaw at the door, he leaped through the trap, and with a stout club he did wonderful execution.

In some manner Watson had managed to free himself from the bonds and thus put in an appearance at the door of the ranch, and his coming had almost proved fatal to Maxwell.

In a short time the league were either all killed or captured. As Stevens was watching the entrance he saw a form issue from a clump of bushes, and the bright moonlight now flooding the ravine enabled him to see the man's features. It was Wide-Awake, and he was about to escape. A few bounds and Stevens had grasped the villain by the throat and hissed into his ears: "Remember the poor boy you murdered in Chicago! I am his brother, and seek vengeance!"

"Take it!" shouted the ruffian, and a bullet whistled close to the detective's ear, and Wide-Awake continued his flight. A score of "vigilantes" issued from the hut, and these, headed by Stevens, rapidly followed in pursuit. Several shots were fired at the fugitive, who could be plainly seen in the bright moonlight. He continued his flight until he came upon the verge of a precipice, and, seizing a yielding ash, he swung himself down from it into the deep glen beneath. His pursuers halted upon the verge, and beheld the scoundrel far, far below them, rapidly escaping. In the space below, he

turned and shouted derisively to the "vigilantes" above.

Scarcely had he done so, when a huge creature emerged from the shadows and leaped upon the unsuspecting man. It was a gigantic grizzly bear! Wide-Awake uttered a horrible cry of despair as he felt the claws of the beast cutting into his flesh, and he was powerless to resist. It was useless to fire at the furious beast as the distance was too great, and it was next to impossible for those above to descend to the spot where the terrible struggle between man and beast was taking place. In the clear moonlight could be seen the horrible fight. The huge brute had borne his victim to the earth, and, with its sharp claws, was rending him, literally, limb from limb.

Sick at heart the party above turned from the scene, and all that was mortal of John Addison, *alias* the "Judge" and "Wide-Awake," leader of the powerful league, was left to the ferocious monster, that growled above his bleeding, dead victim in that desolate glen.

But little more remains to be told. Our story would not be complete without speaking of Richard Maxwell and his blushing bride, Nellie Gordon; and of the jovial Irishman, Flaherty, who tells the blue-eyed child upon his knee the wonderful stories of adventure among the outlaws, and to prove each assertion calls out to a Chinaman washing clothes out in the open air:

"Isn't that so, Misther Wah Sing?"

"You bettee, Flattery, allee true! allee same like Biblee!"

Our story is concluded, and has clearly shown the temporary triumph of vice and crime, but the ultimate and lasting victory of truth, honor, and virtue; and, like the title of the story, we must at all times close our eyes to *wrong*, but when *you are right* be sure to keep "*Wide-Awake*."

THE END.

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| 31. Double Hero. | 244. Keetsee. |
| 32. Irona. | 246. The White Apache. |
| 33. Maum Guinea. | 250. The Border Renegade. |
| 34. Ruth Margerie. | 256. Antelope Abe. |
| 35. East and West. | 258. The White Bravo. |
| 36. The Rifleman of the Miami. | 263. The Border Hunter. |
| 38. The Wrong Man. | 264. Mountain Kate. |
| 39. The Land Claim. | 268. The Specter Riders. |
| 40. Union's Daughter. | 281. The Black Spy. |
| 42. The King's Man. | 282. Ruby Roland. |
| 44. Agnes Falkland. | 283. The Lone Chief. |
| 46. Wreck of the Albion. | 284. The Young Spy. |
| 47. Tim Bumble's Charge. | 289. The Balloon Scouts. |
| 51. The Two Guards. | 292. Black John. |
| 53. Hates and Loves. | 293. The Tonkawa Spy. |
| 54. Myrtle. | 294. The Rival Rovers. |
| 56. Ahmo's Plot. | 298. The Hussar Captain. |
| 60. Jo Daviess' Client. | 299. Mossfoot, the Brave. |
| 61. Laughing Eyes. | 301. Mustang Sam. |
| 62. The Unknown. | 302. Cuban Conspirators. |
| 63. The Indian Princess. | 306. Caribou Zip. |
| 64. Rangers of Mohawk. | 308. Glass Eye. |
| 65. The Wrecker's Prize. | 310. Foghorn Phil. |
| 68. The Brigantine. | 312. Dick Darling. |
| 69. Black Hollow. | 313. The Red Brotherhood. |
| 70. The Indian Queen. | 314. Rival Lieutenants. |
| 72. The Moose Hunter. | 316. Hurricane Bill. |
| 73. The Silver Bugle. | 317. Tippy, the Texan. |
| 74. Cruiser of Chesapeake. | 319. The Pearl Pirates. |
| 77. Quindaro. | 320. The Child Spy. |
| 81. The Two Hunters. | 323. Old Grizzly. |
| 84. The Seminole Chief. | 323. The Dashing Dragoons. |
| 85. The Fugitives. | 324. Will-o'-the-Wisp. |
| 86. Red Plume. | 325. Dashing Dick. |
| 87. On the Deep. | 326. Old Crossfire. |
| 88. Captain Molly. | 327. Ben Bramble. |
| 90. Cast Away. | 328. The Brigand Captain. |
| 91. The Lost Cache. | 329. Old Strategy. |
| 93. The Creole Sisters. | 330. Gray Hair, the Chief. |
| 95. Eph Peters. | 331. The Prairie Tigers. |
| 96. Little Moccasin. | 332. The Rival Hunters. |
| 97. The Doomed Hunter. | 333. The Texan Scout. |
| 98. Ruth Harland. | 334. Zebra Zack. |
| 100. Karabo. | 335. The Masked Messenger. |
| 101. Maid of Wyoming. | 336. Morgan, the Pirate. |
| 102. Hearts Forever. | 337. The Boy Spy. |
| 104. Guilty or Not Guilty. | 338. Tabie, the Trapper. |
| 106. Simple Phil. | 339. The Boy Chief. |
| 107. The Peddler Spy. | 340. Tim, the Trapper. |
| 109. Kidnapped. | 341. Red Ax. |
| 110. The Hidden Home. | 342. Stella, the Spy. |
| 113. Rattlepate. | 343. The White Avenger. |
| 114. Ned Starling. | 344. The Indian King. |
| 115. The Sons of Liberty. | 345. The Long Trail. |
| 116. Port at Last. | 346. Kirk, the Guide. |
| 117. The Mohegan Maiden. | 347. The Phantom Trail. |
| 118. The Water Waif. | 348. The Apache Guide. |
| 119. The Five Champions. | 349. The Mad Miner. |
| 121. Vailed Benefactress. | 350. Keen Eye, the Ranger. |
| 122. Barden, the Ranger. | 351. Blue Belt, Guide. |
| 123. The Missing Bride. | 352. On the Trail. |
| 124. Sumter's Scouts. | 353. The Specter Spy. |
| 125. The Hunted Life. | 354. Old Bald Head. |
| 127. Bald Eagle. | 355. Red Knife, Chief. |
| 128. The Gulch Miners. | 356. Sib Cone, Trapper. |
| 129. Blackeyes. | 357. The Bear Hunter. |
| 132. Old Honesty. | 358. Bashful Bill, Spy. |
| 133. Yankee Eph. | 359. The White Chief. |
| 135. The Cherokee Chief. | 360. Cortina, Scourge. |
| 137. The Traitor Spy. | 361. The Squaw Spy. |
| 139. The Border Foes. | 362. Scout of '76. |
| 142. The Sagamore of Sao. | 363. Spanish Jack. |
| 147. The Maid of the Mountain. | 364. Masked Spy. |
| 154. Rob Ruskin. | 365. Kirke, Renegade. |
| 159. Snowbird. | 366. Dingle, the Outlaw. |
| 165. The Unseen Hand. | 367. The Green Ranger. |
| 169. The White Canoe. | 368. Montbars, Scourge. |
| 176. The Trader Spy. | 369. Metamora. |
| 180. Giant Pete, Patriot. | 370. Thorppath, Trapper. |
| 203. Masked Guide. | 371. Foul-weather Jack. |
| 205. The Gray Scalp. | 372. The Black Rider. |
| 207. The Buffalo Trapper. | 373. The Helpless Hand. |
| 212. Silver Spur. | 374. The Lake Rangers. |
| 213. Squatter Dick. | 375. Alone on the Plains. |
| 214. The Forest Monster. | 376. Phantom Horseman. |
| 215. The White Hermit. | 377. Winona. |
| | 378. Silent Shot, Slayer. |

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| 379. The Phantom Ship. | 407. Blue Clipper. |
| 380. The Red Rider. | 408. Red Dan. |
| 381. The Grizzly-Hunters. | 409. The Fire-Eater. |
| 382. The Mad Ranger. | 410. Blackhawk. |
| 383. The Specter Skipper. | 411. The Lost Ship. |
| 384. The Red Coyote. | 412. Black Arrow. |
| 385. The Hunchback. | 413. White Serpent. |
| 386. The Black Wizard. | 414. The Lost Captain. |
| 387. The Mad Horseman. | 415. The Twin Trailers. |
| 388. The Privateer's Bride. | 416. Death's-head Ranger. |
| 389. The Jaguar Queen. | 417. Captain of Captains. |
| 390. Shadow Jack. | 418. Warrior Princess. |
| 391. Eagle Plume. | 419. The Blue Band. |
| 392. The Ocean Outlaw. | 420. The Squaw Chief. |
| 393. Red Slayer. | 421. The Flying Scout. |
| 394. The Phantom Foe. | 422. Sonora Ben. |
| 395. The Blue Anchor. | 423. The Sea King. |
| 396. Red-Skin's Pledge. | 424. Mountain Gid. |
| 397. The Quadroon Spy. | 425. Death Trapper. |
| 398. The Black Rover. | 426. The Crested Serpent. |
| 399. Red-Belt, the Tuscarora. | 427. Arkansas Kit. |
| 400. The Two Trails. | 428. The Corsair Prince. |
| 401. The Ice Fiend. | 429. Ethan Allen's Rifles. |
| 402. The Red Prince. | 430. Little Thunderbolt. |
| 403. The First Trail. | 431. The Falcon Rover. |
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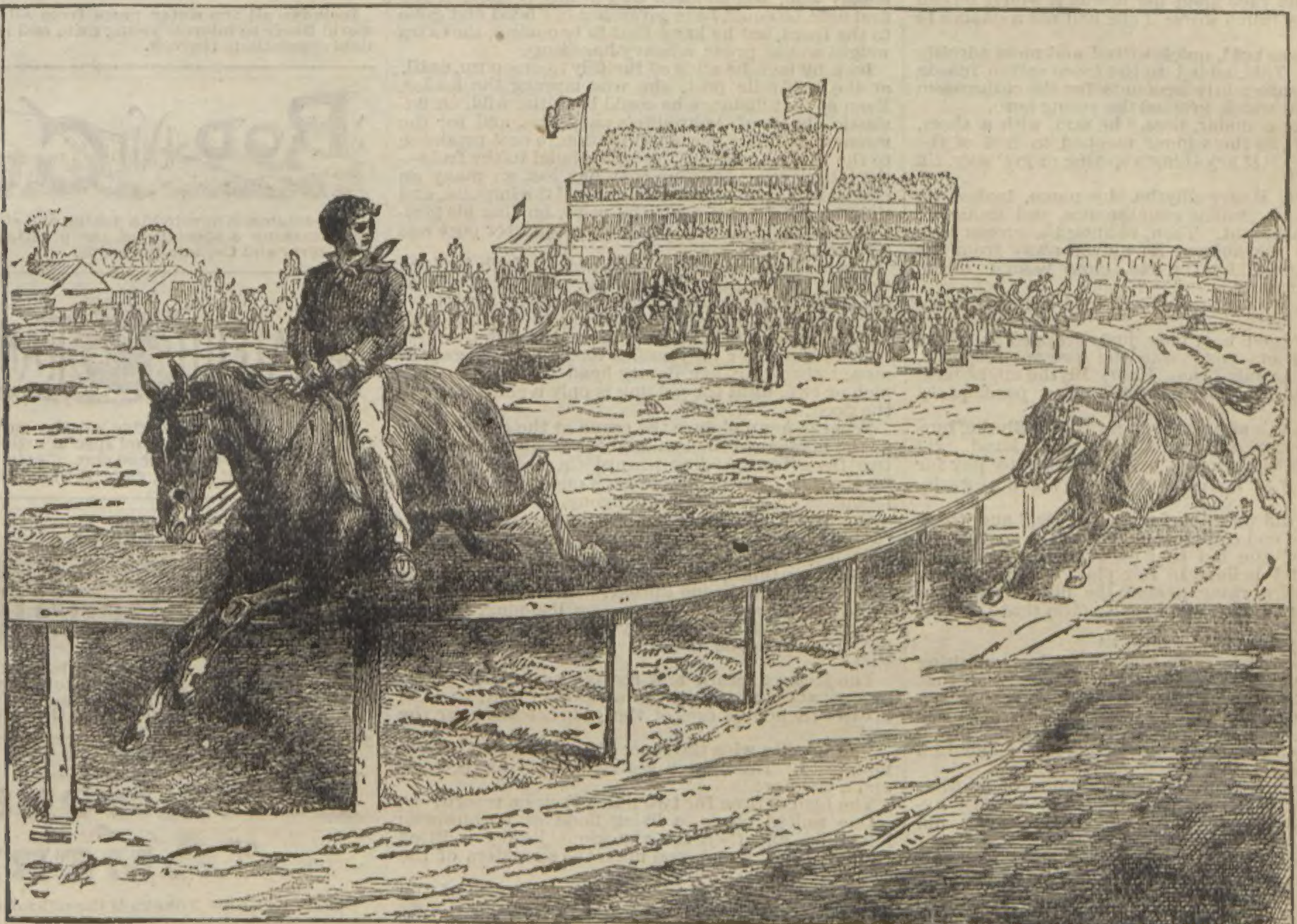
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No. 10.



The Boy Jockey ; OR, Honesty versus Crookedness.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

PLUCKED FROM THE FIRE.

A DULL roar as of gathering waters, broken ever and anon by a shriller note; words faint and indistinct, became blended together; the music so dear to the hearts of all those who love the turf. The grand stand crowded to suffocation with wildly excited, eagerly watching humanity; the quarter-stretch lined ten deep with footmen, horsemen and carriages; the eager eyes of all turned in one direction.

In that direction, a dozen high-strung horses, with starting eye-balls and distended nostrils, now stepping short and high with impatiently tossing heads, now rearing erect despite the strong hand upon the bit, or wheeling sharply around with a fiery longing to begin the stubborn, heart-bursting race. The monkey-like, hump-backed figures of the riders, decked out in gaudy colors, in skull-caps, jackets, cords and top-boots, eying each other with suspicious, uneasy, yet exultant glances. The hoarse, heaved, worried and generally uncomfortable man who officiates as starter; upon these the eyes of all that vast concourse are riveted.

As by one impulse ten thousand hearts give a mighty bound that sends the hot blood surging through the veins, and momentarily robs the eyes of what they have been so eagerly watching for this hour past. A clatter of steel-shod hoofs—they are off! A swirling eddy of wind and dust—they are past—it is a start! Was that the tap of the drum? *Tang—tang—tang!* The huge bell is ringing them back for a more even start. And the mass of spectators settle down with a long breath that is almost a curse.

For a full hour this has been going on, and at least a dozen false starts have been made. The stake is a rich one, the rivalry is high and the betting still

higher. A slight advantage at the send-off may decide the race, and the jockeys are riding with their brains full as much as with their bodies.

In sharp, impatient tones the judges summon the riders before the stand and order them to score by a certain level-headed horse, under penalty of the heaviest fine the rules would permit them to impose.

"The gray filly first, the black gelding second, and the rest tailing, for a thousand!" cried a clear young voice from the inclosure, near the judges' stand.

"I'm your man—" but the enthusiastic prophet was already pressing his way through the densely-crowded mass, and neither heard nor heeded the acceptance of his challenge.

A fine-looking fellow he was, too, though roughly-dressed and mounted upon a shaggy, vicious-appearing mustang pony. Slender, yet finely knit and admirably muscled, of medium height, in slouched felt hat, blue flannel shirt, buck-skin pants and beaded moccasins. Truly an outlandish figure among that mass of beauty and fashion, he hastened on until he could crowd to the rails and gain a fair view of the racers.

Stranger though he was, his eye, that of a true horseman, had picked out the two favorites in the black and the gray, though reversing the places assigned them by the betting ring. The gaunt, long-bodied black gelding was the first favorite; the shorter, smaller, finer-limbed gray filly only second choice. Both were backed heavily, by their owners, as well as by the followers of their respective stables, and popular interest ran extraordinarily high, since both animals were entered for the—let us call it—"Washington Cup," to be run two weeks from that day. The winner of this race would be made first favorite for the Cup.

The young horseman knew nothing of all this. He had eyes only for the little drama being enacted before him, and a sharp cry of anger parted his lips as he witnessed an act of deliberate treachery that threatened defeat if not worse to the beautiful filly with which he had fallen in love.

He saw the man standing at her head cruelly wrenching her jaw with the bit; saw the rider pressing the rowels of his spurs deep into her sides; saw him slip his feet from the stirrups just as the tortured animal reared up and broke away; saw the jockey let loose the reins and fall from the saddle; saw the filly dart down the home stretch with the

speed of the wind amid the wild yells of men and screams of women.

The wildest confusion ensued among horses and men. Already half-maddened, the fiery animals reared and plunged, striving to break from those who struggled to control them. Owners, trainers and grooms were hastening to the rescue. Men and boys were flocking over the rails and up the track. From the thickest of the plunging, trampling, came one shrill, agonizing scream of agony, and when the mass parted a still figure was seen lying there, its scarlet jacket being slowly dyed with crimson stains.

That one cry of indignant rage was all that the young man in the blue flannel shirt uttered. It came too late to do any good, and if it reached any other ears, the exciting scene which followed, quickly obliterated its memory.

Like his neighbors, this young man seemed growing crazy, but there was method in his madness. Under a strong pull, the shaggy mustang reared up, wheeled as upon a pivot, then lowered its head and fairly butted its way through the thickening crowd. One swift glance around, then the young fellow headed directly for the half-mile post, plying whiplcord and steel until the mustang ran at full speed, covering the level, springy turf with the long leaps and lightning recovery of a jack rabbit.

Absorbing though the scene up the home stretch was, all had not forgotten the gray filly Aphrodite, and scores of eyes followed her swift flight, in mingled dread and despair. Even if she did not cripple or destroy herself, her chances for the race would be ruined.

White-faced and haggard the owner stood on the stand, his daughter clinging to his arm. He saw nothing but the gray filly—the one frail barrier that separated him from utter and irretrievable ruin. But the maiden—

"See! that man—he will stop her—he will save her!"

As though the agitated words had touched the key-note, a united cheer went up from the crowd. They also saw the bold rider, and divined his purpose.

That one cheer, then silence; they could only watch.

Swift as a swallow the little mustang flew across the inclosure, its rider keeping one eye upon the

as if to calculate his chances of being in the race. The race is close—too close, and he leans to the left, now heading so as to strike the rails a hundred yards beyond the painted post.

Now! a touch of the spur, a stiff hand bearing upon the bit, and the gallant little mustang rises at the rail as though born a hurdler! Almost in the face of the gray filly, she swerves and loses her stride. Cat-like the mustang recovers itself, and now races along, two lengths ahead of Aphrodite. The true-born racer forgets its fear in its ambition, and with one eager toss of its lady-like head, stretches out to win the race or die!

The young rider smiles grimly. The filly has the pole. She is gaining upon him at every stride. He touches the left-hand rein gently, then frees his feet from the stirrups. Another moment she is alongside, running with the swift, level motion of an engine. She will pass him.

No! An enthusiastic cheer bursts from the crowd. They see the young man leap lightly from horse to filly—see her start with an affrightened, sidelong jump; then they see her emerge from the cloud of dust, and upon her back rides the blue-shirted hero, as though born to the pig-skin!

Then it was that the cheer was given until the welkin rung, and all semblance of order was cast to the winds, as the gray filly came cantering down the quarter-stretch, with the shaggy mustang bringing up the rear at a respectful distance.

The case was not an ordinary one. An immense amount of money was depending upon the filly, and her defeat would mean ruin to more than one. If she lost the race upon her merits it would be bad enough; how much worse if she had not a chance to win.

The act was bold, quick-witted and most adroitly performed. This, added to the more selfish reason just given, sufficiently accounts for the enthusiasm of the crowd which greeted the young hero.

"Sound as a dollar, boss," he said, with a short, merry laugh, as the winner stooped to feel of the filly's limbs. "If any thing's sprung or giv' way, I'll eat my hat!"

The owner, Henry Blythe by name, looked up into the frank, smiling countenance, and motioned the lad to dismount. Then, bidding the groom look carefully to the animal, he moved away from the crowd, followed by the lad, close behind whom came the mustang.

"Who and what are you?" he said, abruptly, turning around.

A two-legged boy, boss, just dropped in to see the hoss-critters run," was the prompt response, but one less agitated than Henry Blythe might have seen that the lad felt hurt by such a peremptory address.

"Come to this address to-night," said Blythe, hurriedly, thrusting a card into the lad's hand. "I have not enough money with me now to pay for the service you have done me, but I am grateful—"

"What I did was not for money, sir," and there was a sudden and complete change in the speech and demeanor of the lad that even Blythe could not overlook. "I believe in fair play. When I saw they were all working against the filly, I was mad enough to cry, and it was to spite them that I caught her as I did."

"Who do you mean by them?"

"The groom, the rider and all. I know nothing about you, sir, but I will say this: If you wish that filly to win this race, put up an honest rider with a cool head, and win it she will. There's only one horse—the black—that can give her anything like a brush, and with an even chance, she can make him take her dust."

"My jockey was hurt—I don't know of another one that I dare trust—unless you will do it?" exclaimed Blythe, with a sudden brightening up.

"How heavy do you ride?"

"I weigh one-thirty; but I can ride fifteen pounds lighter than any other of my weight that I ever met. Mind, I don't ask for the mount, because that is not my trade; but if you wish, and for the sake of giving the little beauty a fair show, I'll ride her."

Blythe hesitated, as well he might, with his every dollar at stake, but several of his friends came up, and turned the scale in favor of the stranger. Not even a second-rate rider could be obtained, and the few minutes of grace allowed by the judges was almost expired.

"Put the boy up, Blythe. You must give us a show for our money," they urged, impatiently. "And you, my lad," one of them added, addressing the youth. "Win this race, and I'll give a hundred dollars out of my own pocket toward a purse for you."

"If I ride at all, I'll ride to win, be sure of that. What's the word, boss?"

"It's a risk—a great risk. You've never ridden a race before?"

"A dozen—and where my life was the stake, too! But, that don't matter. You act as though I was asking a great favor of you—"

"Instead of my asking one—I beg your pardon," and there was a sudden change in Blythe's demeanor. "I have so much at stake, that it is only natural I should hesitate; but I will do so no longer. Will you ride the filly for me—as a great favor?"

"Since you can do no better—yes. I haven't a dollar at stake, gentlemen, but I'll give a finger to see the little beauty come under the wire ahead—and if the extra weight is not too much, she will be first."

This point decided, all the necessary preliminaries were quickly arranged. The new rider stripped for the race, appearing in white drawers, blue shirt and a blue silk handkerchief bound tightly around his head, then weighed, saddled and mounted, listening with a careless smile to the eager, minute instructions of the anxious owner. A true-born horseman, he already understood his mount better than Blythe could tell him.

Two more false starts, then the drum tapped to a tolerably fair send-off, the favorite, if anything, with a little the best of it.

Around the turn to the first quarter, and the black horse is still in the lead, hugging the pole closely, and running like clock-work. Often tested, seldom defeated, his owner has implicit confidence in his staying powers, and has given the jockey orders to run the race from end to end, feeling confident that ere the two miles are covered, that extra twenty pounds

will tell the tale upon the gray filly, his only really dangerous competitor.

At the half-mile there is little change, though one or two of the field are slowly losing ground, thus early finding themselves in too good company. A dozen lengths behind Midnight comes Aphrodite, and many a heart beats anxiously as they fancy she is losing or gaining ground.

Around the upper turn, and now the swiftly-moving figures come in sight at the head of the home stretch.

The hum of the human swarm grows louder and more intense with every second. They can see that the black gelding still holds the pole—that through the dust-cloud a white head is protruding—and now! a gleam of something blue, growing more and more distinct. The gray filly—she is gaining—ahead—no, the black—see! they are here! a clatter of hoofs—a swirl of wind—and they are gone!

Midnight leading, Aphrodite an open length behind, the remainder trailing, several already out of the race.

In this order the racers pass beneath the wire. The leading jockey receives a signal to push ahead; a desperate policy, since the watches of the judges record only one minute and forty-five seconds, but there is more than money at stake upon this race.

Henry Blythe's heart gives a fierce leap as his new rider in passing gives a swift wave of his hand; an action that speaks louder than words. It says "Do not despair—the race is ours!"

The amateur jockey firmly believed what his signal conveyed. Thus far Aphrodite had run under a steady pull, and he knew that at any portion of the first mile he could have given her her head and gone to the front, but he knew that in two miles, the extra weight would prove a heavy handicap.

Inch by inch he allowed the filly to creep up, until, at the half-mile post, she was lapping the leader. Even at that distance he could hear the wild, enthusiastic cheers of Aphrodite's partisans, and for the moment he felt a fierce temptation to cast prudence to the winds and send the silver head to the front—the intoxicating delirium that has lost so many an almost won race—but he smothered the impulse, and tightened his grasp upon the reins, holding his position and no more, until the three-quarter post was reached.

Gradually he slackened his grasp. Inch by inch the filly closed upon the gelding. Her head was at his saddle girth as they entered the home stretch.

The knee spur is already scoring the ribs of Midnight. Twice the lithe whip hisses through the air—but the blue rider only smiles as he sees his gallant mount thrusting her dainty head forward another inch or two, until the gelding is only a short neck to the good.

What pen can picture the scene at the grand stand as the maddened thousands there assembled see the two favorites speeding toward them, head on, and no one able to even guess which one is ahead? Each instant is an age of ecstatic agony.

On past the distance flag—to the grand stand—running neck and neck, as though coupled together. Then for the first time, Aphrodite feels the whip-cord, twice, three times, in hissing strokes—and the race is over, amid a deafening uproar, where all are yelling, shouting, screaming, and no one listening. Which won and which lost? Every person is wildly exultant, for each one believes his or her choice has won.

The jockeys return and receive permission to dismount; they hasten to the weighing room; then all is utter silence as one of the judges leans over the railing.

"Aphrodite wins the race; Midnight second; Red-man third. Time, three minutes, thirty-five seconds and a quarter!"

The fastest time for two miles then on record! One united cheer—a living flood of enthusiastic humanity, and then the victorious jockey is lifted from his feet and borne upon the shoulders of the crowd.

This opening of Chapter I. is a specimen of the whole, which is pure in language and spirit, very exciting, and vivid as a story of the turf. The jockey is a remarkable character who has a remarkable career, out of which this brilliant author has made an entrancing Romance, good for all to read. See No. 10 of THE YOUNG NEW YORKER for the continuation of the story. Sold by all newsdealers.

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BASE BALL, CRICKET AND FOOTBALL; HARE AND HOUNDS; SWIMMING, ROWING, YACHTING AND SKATING; FISHING, HUNTING, TRAPPING AND CAMPING; SHOOTING, ATHLETICS GYMNASTICS, LEAPING AND PEDESTRIANISM.

In brief, everything to entertain and interest, amuse and instruct our Boys and Young Men—to advance them physically and mentally—a paper that shall have no taint of impurity, but worthy of the confidence and co-operation of every one who would have a Boys' Weekly sans reproche in their homes and hands.

The following "department" headings indicate the field, scope and general interest of the specialties of THE YOUNG NEW YORKER.

SPORTS & PASTIMES.

This department, including all games of ball, croquet and skating, is conducted by Henry Chadwick, a guarantee that it contains everything of note in its specialties; among which is the game of chess.

ATHLETICS.

Treats of all athletic sports that improve the body and mind, making a specialty of pedestrianism.

YACHTING AND ROWING.

Includes all the water news from all parts of the world likely to interest young men, and is full of practical suggestions thereon.

ROD & GUN.

This column is devoted to fishing and shooting of all sorts, making a specialty of the practical shooting of Dr. Carver and Captain Bogardus.

AMATEUR FANCIER.

In this department we give all the current news on fancy stock of all kinds, and special articles by leading fanciers on the breeding and care of pets, especially the Antwerp homing pigeon, game fowl, and so forth.

Amateur Journalism.

This department is conducted by a young man who proves that he can give points to many professional editors. In it we have all the news about the journals conducted by young men all over the Union.

LOYAL SONS OF AMERICA.

THE YOUNG NEW YORKER is the official organ of this society, which aims to confirm the youth of our country in patriotism, honor and fidelity. It has lodges in every State in the Union.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED.

We pay particular attention to hunting up information to answer correspondents especially on the subject of out-door sports, pastimes, feats of strength, etc.

News & Notes of the Day.

This department needs no explanation. We aim to give a great deal in a small space of everything worthy of note during the week.

Humor Graphics.

This department has no other excuse for existence than the fact that it is only a joke.

NOTE. We intend soon to publish a series of special articles by men renowned for athletic feats of all kinds, and shall commence with one by Captain Paul Boyton on Life Saving.

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